

# 異世界料理道

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Cooking with  
wild game.

VOLUME  
7



# Cooking with Wild Game 異世界料理道

## Volume 7

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## Credits



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《南の大樹亭》  
のために準備した、  
新しい献立——それは  
『ギバの角煮』であつた。

「ううむ。芳しいですなあ」  
と、ナウデイスが大きな鼻をひくひくとさせている。

# 異世界料理道

Cooking with wild game.

VOLUME  
7





森辺の民たち——





ようやく町へと  
なじみ始めた



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# Prologue

「Asuta, what happened here!?」

Ai Fa's hysterical scream shook the heavens, surprising me deeply.

We were staying in the familiar empty house inside the Wu clan village right now.

After the turbulent house head conference, we quickly returned to the Wu clan. It was between noon and dusk right now, and it felt about 3pm to me.

As we didn't sleep much for the entire night, I washed up at the Wu clan's water source and freshened myself. I just came back refreshed, and Ai Fa was holding her hands on her hips, standing inside the room with her legs wide apart, and quivering from fury.

「What is it? Why are you so mad?」

「You are asking me that!? Why you...」

Ai Fa walked towards me in wide strides. I stood in place helplessly, and she pointed at the center of my body.

「What is this!? Why is there a wound!?」

「Ah, this... is from last night when Doddo Tsun sent me flying with a kick. I was shocked when I took off my clothes just now too.」

After washing my T-shirt at the water source, I only put on the vest-like shirt when I came back. Hence, the patch of blue-black at the center of my torso was clearly visible.

I thought I got off lucky with such a trivial injury after getting kicked by a man from Forest's Edge. If I was hit anywhere else, he probably would have broken my ribs.

But Ai Fa still looked outraged.

「Why didn't you tell me about this!? You said you were fine! Asuta, did you lie to me?」

「Ehh? Something this trivial is considered fine, right? It doesn't even hurt if I don't pay it attention.」

「... So that means, it hurts if you pay attention to it, right?」

Ai Fa squat down onto the floor, leaned in close to my belly and stared at the bruise.

「That damn second son actually did this to you... Damn it! I should have got him back before handing him over to Donda Wu!」



「No, I bit down hard on the back of his hand too. We are even, so you don't need to seek revenge.」

Ai Fa bit her lips in frustration as she caressed my wound gently.

「... Does it hurt? Do you need medicine?」

「Not at all! The contusion will heal if we leave it alone. Thank you for worrying about me.」

「... I'm so frustrated.」

Ai Fa moved her hands away.

She hugged my body with her arms and put her cheek against the contusion.

I screamed in my heart: 「Uwah!」 and didn't dare to move.

「I-I-I'm really fine! You are worrying too much! This is just a scratch in the eyes of hunters, correct?」

「You are a hearth caretaker, not a hunter.」

「That's true...」

Ai Fa tightened her arms.

I was getting stifled to death.

「... I don't want to see you hurt.」

Ai Fa said quietly.

「Seeing a frail person like you get hurt feels more painful than me being torn apart... And I'm also frustrated because of my powerlessness to protect my family...」

「Not at all. After that huge commotion, we should be grateful that we all survived with our limbs intact.」

My mind was falling into panic mood, but I still managed to squeeze out that line.

「Ai Fa, I'm happy as long as you are safe. If Diga Tsun did anything to you, I will definitely lose my mind.」

「Yes. If I wasn't woken up because someone force-fed me wine, it could be a little dangerous.」

Ai Fa exhaled with her cheeks on my abdomen.

Her warm breath sent a chill down my back.

「The Tsun clan is powerless to harm us now, but we don't know how much hardships await us in the future. We have to be careful and keep our guard up.」



「Yes, I completely agree with you.」

So it's about a time for you to let go of me— as I was thinking that, someone knocked the door behind us.

「Asuta, are you still not ready...?」

Vena Wu appeared at the door.

I still had to prepare for tomorrow's business.

「Okay, in a moment...! Ai Fa, I need to go to work.」

「Hmm...」

Ai Fa relaxed her arms very slowly and stared at me closely.

「Asuta, is there anything I can help you with?」

「Yes, there should be. But don't you want to sleep?」

「It's still bright out, I can't sleep. If there's nothing for me to help with, I will forage for firewood.」

「Then come help me. Somehow, I really want to...」

*I really want to be with you*— I decided to swallow these words.

We will be working apart from tomorrow onwards. I want to spend as much time together with Ai Fa as possible.

「I understand.」

Ai Fa stood up and said to me with a satisfied face.

I spent some time to change my mood.

Tomorrow, I will continue my stall's business. The day after tomorrow, I will be providing meals to the inns. But my mind was still filled with thoughts about the aftermath with the matter of the Tsun clan. So I had to switch gears and change my mood.

「We will need to prepare one hundred of each meal, right...? How should we go about it...?」

「Let's start with the 『Kiba burger』. One hundred portions would require, erm~, 25 arias.」

I asked Ai Fa and Vena Wu to help me carry out the necessary ingredients from the food store. After that, Vena Wu diced the aria. Ai Fa watched her work and sighed in awe.



「Hmm...」

「... What's the matter, Ai Fa...?」

「No, I just think your knife work is exceptional. I thought you aren't good with tending to the hearth.」

「Hmm...? I had plenty of chances to help Asuta after all, of course my culinary skills will improve... Besides, I find caretaking the hearth to be quite a joy...」

Vena Wu's sexy lips broke out into a smile.

「Speaking of which, Ai Fa, you often help out with the hearth too, but your knife work is poor... Is there a reason for that...?」

「Hmm? No particular reason. Asuta is the hearth caretaker of the Fa house, I will only make the food taste worse if I butt in.」

「I see... You're a hunter after all...」

「Yes, you're right.」

It was rare to see Ai Fa and Vena Wu chat for so long.

If the one helping today was Lala Wu, I would feel glad to see them talking. But this combination made me feel a little awkward.

As I was thinking about that, Vena Wu's words went beyond being awkward.

「Ai Fa... are you really planning not to marry...?」

Ai Fa's expression was calm, but she became annoyed immediately.

「I don't plan to marry anyone. I already said that to Donda Wu many times.」

「Ignore Papa Donda for now... Besides, from the way they acted last night, they probably aren't that stubborn about blood relations now and will treat the Fa house as the friends of the Wu clan and Lutim house...」

「... The relationship between the Wu clan and the Fa house turned sour two years ago, I'm happy that we can renew our bonds.」

「That's right, I'm happy about that too... But never mind all that, you are still not planning to marry...?」

Vena Wu insisted, and Ai Fa furrowed her brows.

「No means no. Eldest daughter of the Wu clan, why do you keep asking?」

「Hmm... In that case, you won't object even if Asuta takes in a wife, right...?」



「Wait! Vena Wu, what are you saying all of a sudden!？」

I couldn't help cutting in. Vena Wu laughed.

「It's just an assumption... If you marry into another house, it will be troubling for Ai Fa. But if you take in a wife as a member of the Fa house, she has no reasons to object, correct...？」

I glanced at Ai Fa timidly.

Ai Fa— she had a childish shocked expression.

With that expression on her face, she turned towards me.

「Asuta, is there any woman you want to marry right now?」

「No one!」

「I see, there's no one.」

Ai Fa repeated my words robotically, then turned towards Vena Wu.

「Eldest daughter of the Wu clan, it seems he doesn't want to marry anyone.」

「That's what he thinks now... Who knows if that will change in the future...？」

Ai Fa nodded, then turned back to me again.

「Asuta, is there anyone you will want to marry in the future?」

「That's impossible! I already told you before, that I don't plan to marry anyone.」

「I see. That's true.」

「... But feelings can change... Ai Fa, there might be a girl who wants to be Asuta's wife in the future. If Asuta accepts her, will you give them your blessings as the house head...？」

「Blessing...」

Ai Fa blinked.

「Blessings... Blessings, huh...」

「That's right... when a member of your house marries, you have to offer your blessings as the house head, correct...？」

Ai Fa's mind seemed to stall and she didn't move.

She appeared to be very troubled— I could almost hear the hard disk in her mind churning noisily.

「Ah! It's Ai Fa!」



At this moment, an angel descended from the heaven to our rescue.

It was the youngest daughter of the Wu clan, Rimee Wu.

「Asuta, Vena-nee, welcome home! Did the house head conference go well?」

I quietly wiped my cold sweat away. I smiled in return to the nostalgic innocent smile before me:

「Well, it will take quite some time to explain it all... I will tell you the details when Donda Wu and the others come back.」

「Ehh? Papa Donda isn't back yet?」

The three newly-elected tribal chiefs and their kins were still in the Tsun clan village and taking care of the miscellaneous affairs. The women and I returned to the Wu clan village first.

「I see. It's great that everyone is safe. Ai Fa, let's chat with Grandma Jiba!」

「No, I'm still helping Asuta with his work...」

「Huh~! Ai Fa, you will be going back to the Fa house with Asuta tomorrow, right? Then I won't get to see you for some time! We didn't chat yesterday, so I want to stay with you today.」

Rimee Wu kept clinging on to Ai Fa like a puppy.

Ai Fa's mind seemed to be still stalling, so I smiled at her:

「Don't worry about us, go with her. Grandma Jiba must be hoping to chat with you more.」

「I see... Then I will go over for a bit.」

With these words, Ai Fa turned to Vena Wu with a cloudy expression.

「Eldest daughter of the Wu clan, about what you asked just now.」

「Yes, what is it...?」

「... I don't know. I can't sort out my thoughts and feelings properly.」

After Ai Fa and Rimee Wu left together, I glared at Vena Wu.

「Vena Wu! Just what are you trying to do!? Why did you ask these kinds of questions so suddenly...!」

「Because Ai Fa always looks so carefree, so it irked me a little...」

Vena puffed her cheeks.

「Me, you, Leina, and Darum all have our fair share of troubles, but only Ai Fa is being dense. Doesn't it feel weird...? That's unfair...」

「I don't think this has anything to do with fairness.」

It had to be hard for Ai Fa to make the decision to live on as a hunter.

As a woman, she gave up on the route of marrying and raising children, choosing to wither away in the forest instead— it had to be a tough decision to make.

「... I wouldn't feel this way if you and Ai Fa were related by blood... I still can't accept this...」

After Vena Wu finished complaining, she showed a sorrowful expression.

「Sorry... This isn't something I should bring up in the middle of work... I was wrong.」

Her reaction stirred my sense of guilt.

Lives always had to be filled with tribulations, but I still couldn't find a way to build a proper relationship between me, Vena Wu, and Leina Wu.

Especially being with Vena Wu troubled me the most. When we worked together in the Post Station Town, I could feel strongly that we had built trust and goodwill that didn't involve boy-girl relationships. That made me feel guilty.

She was a good friend of the opposite sex and a coworker... I wasn't sure how to describe our relationship, but I cherished her deeply. If she fell for another man and decided to marry him, I would give her my blessings and think of it as my relative marrying out.

*... I wonder how Shumimaru is doing...*

I thought about that silvered-haired young Semu man and sighed.

Vena Wu sighed too.

「Asuta, are you going back tomorrow...?」

「Yes. Thank you for accommodating me all this while.」

「I will feel lonely... Just thinking about what will happen tomorrow makes me feel like dying...」

「Y-You are exaggerating too much.」

「No, it's not just about you leaving... I have an ominous feeling...」

「Ominous feeling?」

「... A member of the Tsun clan will move to this village, correct...?」

So that was the thing troubling her.



The members of the Tsun clan main house had to lose their family name and become members of other houses. Diga Tsun... no, Diga, Doddo, and Tay will become a part of the Dom house. Yamiel would probably join the Zaza house or Sauti clan.

The other three Tsun clan members, Aura, Zwei and Mida, didn't commit any serious crimes.

「... Doesn't it feel like the youngest son will come over to the Wu clan...?」

「Hmm~ who knows? Since this is the Wu clan's idea, you guys will take in at least one member of the Tsun clan.」

「That's true...」

「Furthermore, only a powerful house could take Mida in.」

「That's true...」

「... Also, Mia Lei Wu seemed fine with Mida.」

「Ahhh... I really want to die...」

When Vena Wu was sulking, sounds of commotion could be heard from outside the house.

Vena Wu and I looked at each other and sighed deeply at the same time.

We left the stove room and headed to the plaza. The scene before us wasn't too different from what we were expecting. The group that stayed behind in the Tsun clan village had returned, and the women from the Wu clan branch houses were surrounding them.

Not everyone was back. I saw Donda Wu, Ludo Wu, and Dan Lutim, but Darum Wu and Lau Lei weren't there. Only half of the house head conference participants have returned.

A few ex-Tsun clan members were before us.

They were Aura, Zwei, and Mida.

The Wu clan women were probably chattering because Mida's alien-like appearance was too scary. Mida showed up at the Lutim house wedding before, but his appearance was too weird, so even those who had seen him before would still be shocked.

「Thank you for your hard work. You are back so early?」

As Vena Wu was standing stiffly beside me, I greeted Donda Wu. He turned his head away as if I was annoying, and Ludo Wu answered on his behalf:

「We have to bring the members of the Tsun clan over, so we came back. Darum-nii and the others are still watching the Tsun clan branch house members.」

About half of the Tsun clan branch house members were adopted by their kins, and about ten-odd people stayed behind in the Tsun clan village.

As the forest around the Tsun clan village had been picked clean, before new vegetables grew, the Tsun clan couldn't hunt kiba in that area. Additionally, the Tsun clan members had not performed their duties as hunters for over ten years and lost their abilities to hunt kiba. Aside from providing assistance to them, we also needed to confirm if they had the resolve to live properly as a denizens of Forest's Edge.

After the main house members lost their clan name, the branch house members would be the key for the rebuilding of the Tsun clan. If they couldn't regain their hunting skills, the Tsun clan's name would die out.

「Yamiel isn't here, huh. Which house would be adopting her?」

「Hmm～? That's not confirmed yet. The Wu clan and Lutim house are too near to the Fa house. The Zaza and Sauti aren't willing to take her in too. We are locking her up in the Tsun clan for now and had sent men to keep an eye on her.」

「... I see.」

That was all I could say.

Yamiel was the mastermind behind this criminal act, so everyone would naturally be wary of her. I knew this couldn't be helped, but my heart still felt heavy.

「Asuta, why do you look so down!? There are still problematic matters to resolve, but I will send Kaslan to the Tsun clan village tomorrow. And with that, things will be more or less settled. Just leave the troublesome matters to him!」

Dan Lutim laughed heartily as usual.

He then gestured with his thick fingers to call Aura and Zwei over.

「Lutim house will be taking them in. Our family doesn't have enough women in the first place, so this works out just fine...! Asuta, you and Ai Fa are good friends with the Lutim house, so I brought my family over to greet you.」

「Ah, so they will be joining the Lutim house.」

This was a piece of good news. Zwei might have a mature personality, but she was just twelve years old like Lala Wu. It seemed a little heartless to make her live apart from her mother.

Once Dan Lutim finished saying that, Aura bowed deeply at us. Her blue eyes were still lifeless, but they weren't murky like before. They were completely filled with sorrow.



Zwei clung to Aura's leg and kept glaring at me. After all, my words led to the destruction of the Tsun clan, so of course she would hate me.

Even so, I still hoped this pair of mother and daughter could find happiness.

「Ai Fa, so you're here too. Well, that's how things are, we will be in your care.」

I was surprised by Dan Lutim's words. I turned around and saw that Ai Fa was standing nearby without me realizing it. Rimee Wu was hiding behind Ai Fa, and she gasped with an 「Uwah」 when she saw Mida's gigantic body.

Mama Mia Lei stood behind the two of them with a satisfied smile. Leina Wu, Lala Wu, and the others were probably still napping and weren't here.

「We are going then! Donda Wu and Kaslan will head to the Tsun clan village tomorrow. I will tell him to drop by the Wu clan village on his way there.」

「Got it, I will head to Tsun clan again with him.」

「Alright then, let's go!」

At this moment... Mida stood before Aura and Zwei.

He stared at his former family members, without a shred of emotions in his beady eyes, just like an animal.

「... Aura, Zwei, you are going...?」

「Yes... Mida, take care of yourself.」

Aura reached out with her slender hand and touched Mida's trunk-like arm.

Zwei looked up at her former brother without a word— at Mida's big body.

Mida's cheeks started trembling.

「Mida... Mida will be lonely...」

「Yes. I will be lonely too... But there is no other way. We have to atone for our sins.」

「Aura, Mida can't see you and Zwei again...?」

「Yes. The Tsun clan main house is gone. You will need to live as a member of the Wu clan now.」

So the Wu clan had taken Mida in.

Vena Wu who was standing behind me suddenly grabbed my waistband.

「Mida can't see Yamiel, Tay... Diga, and Doddo again...?」

「Yes... even if you have the chance to meet them again, you can't listen to their orders. You are already a part of the Wu clan and have to obey the Wu clan. You must forget the rule of the Tsun clan, and follow the laws of the Wu clan, okay? If you do so— you will definitely live a happy life.」

「... Mida wants to live together with Aura and Zwei.」

Mida collapsed heavily onto his knees and looked up at Aura from below.

Aura showed a sorrowful smile and placed her hand on Mida's hill-like shoulder.

「Mida, you are strong and will definitely become an excellent hunter, and do what Zuro, Diga, and Doddo couldn't do. You must live on strongly as a member of the Wu clan...?」

「... Mida...」

I couldn't help holding back my surprise.

Mida's disproportionately small eyes started tearing up.

「Man, give me a break.」

Ludo Wu fled to our side.

「Woooahhhh...」

The next instant, a weird sounding roar came from Mida's mouth. His roar was shocking, with his high and low pitch harmonizing into a whirlpool.

If glass existed in this world, all of them would have shattered. This explosive sound was no different from a sonic boom.

「Shut up! Shut up! You already cried your heart out at the Tsun clan village! Restrain yourself!」

Ludo Wu covered his ears and shouted.

Mida's deafening cries drowned out Ludo Wu's shout. His tears flowed like two rivers down his cheeks, forming a puddle on the ground.

「Shut up, stupid!」

Even when Zwei kicked Mida's legs, he still didn't stop crying.

His first cry hurt my eardrums deeply. I covered my ears with a sourness in my heart. Mida's expression was full of deep sorrow.

Mida's fat body made him look like a monster, and he didn't seem interested in anything but food. But now, his face was twisted as he kept crying. As Mida's face was full of fats, it was hard for him to show any expression. But the heartbreaking sadness he was showing made him look no different from a baby.



「Mida... is lonely... Mida doesn't want to separate from Aura and Zwei...」

He finally stopped his wailing and squeezed out this line between sobs.

「Thank you, Mida... But this is the way.」

Aura didn't shed any tears, but her face was filled with deep sorrow.

When he heard that, Mida scowled his face again. But before he could cry out, an unexpected voice cut him off.

「Shut up! How long a big guy like you is going to cry!? Men can't shed tears in front of others so easily!」

I was probably the most surprised person here. The one who said that and walked before Mida was Ai Fa.

「You think of those people who didn't obey the rules as your family, correct? I can understand how you feel. But no matter how much you cry and shout, your fate won't change. If you see yourself as a member of Forest's Edge, have some pride!」

Mida turned to Ai Fa in surprise.

His gigantic face was covered in tears, snot, and saliva, and Ai Fa was glaring at him with cat-like eyes.

「You all committed a crime, and losing your family is the punishment. You have to understand how serious that crime is... For you who have sinned, this is the only path you can take.」

「But... Mida...」

「I know how sad it is to lose all your family. It is on par with your body being torn apart, but there must be a way for you to overcome this obstacle.」

Ai Fa scowled her nose, and swiftly leaned her face towards Mida.

「Even though your family's bonds had been broken, all of you are still alive. If you live on properly as a member of the Wu clan, and they live as members of the Lutim house, you can meet them again one day. Since there is still hope, stop crying!」

「... Mida can see Aura and Zwei again...?」

「We can't let you meet with the eldest daughter and men from the Tsun clan. But you will have the chance to meet these two women. After all, the Wu clan and Lutim house are kins.」

Dan Lutim answered.

Even this heroic man seemed a little down.

「Mida... can see Yamiel and Tay too...?」

「That will depend on your efforts. You haven't even put in any effort yet, so you can't demand anything.」

Seeing Ai Fa glaring at him with a scary face, Mida muttered: 「Sorry...」

「Ara ara, you are a step faster than me, Ai Fa... You really are an excellent house head.」

Mama Mia Lei walked to Mida with a smile.

「Even without blood relations, family is still family. If you live on properly as a member of Forest's Edge, the clan head will bestow you with the Wu family name. There's no use in thinking about the past. You have to work hard and live on properly.」

Mama Mia Lei took out a piece of cloth and wiped Mida's face.

「... Alright, let's go.」

Dan Lutim looked at the departing figure of those two and then left the plaza with his kins.

Mida would become a member of the Wu clan, Aura and Zwei will join the Lutim house. Diga, Doddo, and Tay would become a part of the Dom house. As for Yamiel... Kaslan Lutim would figure something out.

The three new tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge would be responsible for liaising with the landlord of Genos. Four days later, the caravan that Kamyua Yost would be escorting would pass through Forest's Edge. Before that, we had to notify him officially about the demise of the Tsun clan.

There were piles of problems awaiting us. For the sake of a better future for Forest's Edge, our denizens would need to work together to mend the wrongs committed in the past by the chief clan.

「Well then, we should start preparing dinner.」

I returned to my work with the cheerfully smiling Mama Mia Le and the sighing Vena Wu.



# Chapter 1 - Business Reopens

## Part 1

Two days after the house head conference, the twelfth day of the Blue month, we safely restarted our business in the Post Station Town.

「Long time no see, Milano Mast!」

We went around to the back of the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 and greeted him energetically, and Milano Mast received us with his usual sour face.

「You are noisy so early in the morning. It's just two days off, what's long about that.」

「Ara, it felt really long to me, I will be in your care today too.」

「... I don't remember ever caring about you. If you want to run your business, then hurry up and take your stall with you.」

「Yes!」

After answering, I looked closely at Milano Mast's unhappy face.

「What, you got a problem with that?」

「No, none at all!」

The Tsun clan might be behind the death of Milano Mast's good friend, but they were destroyed now— at this point of time, I still couldn't tell Milano Mast about this.

Even if I told him that, the regret in his heart would still linger. After all, the Tsun clan wasn't punished for hurting the citizens of the Post Station Town.

*I hope Genos castle can be impartial in the future— first of all, Donda Wu and the other new tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge had to form a proper relationship with the landlord of Genos.*

I suppressed the feelings welling up in my heart and strode forth on the stone-paved road. Unlike the previous days, I was with Shela Wu, Vena Wu, and Lala Wu.

The wooden buildings on both sides of the road, the bustling travelers and merchants, the Totos Moa pulling heavy loads... All these felt so nostalgic that it didn't feel like I was away for just two days.

「Asuta, you look really happy.」

Lala who was pushing the cart with me commented. She also looked really cheerful, Shela Wu and Vena Wu were also all smiles.

We were probably affected by the town's lively atmosphere since the work in the Tsun clan village was too serious. For the denizens of Forest's Edge, the Post Station Town used to be an uncomfortable place or even the enemy camp. But they no longer felt repulsive of this place. I felt satisfied just looking at how cheerful they looked.

As we advanced along the stone-paved road, a familiar voice called out to me.

「Ah! Asuta-niichan is here!」

It was a cute girl with caramel-colored hair, Tara.

Uncle Dora was also standing under the canvas roof with a smile.

「Hi, Asuta, I'm glad you look well. What are you buying?」

「Hello, long time no see. Please give me two tarapas, 4 tinos, and 20 arias.」

「Alright, that will be 8 red copper plates.」

This conversation felt nostalgic too.

How should I put it, the homesickness in my heart was slowly fading away.

I'm really suited to running a business in this town after all.

Even though my time in this different world was short, I was still a denizen of Forest's Edge. The Forest's Edge settlement and the Fa house was my irreplaceable hometown in this world. Besides, even now, there were still some people in the city who didn't hide their fear and disdain for the denizens of Forest's Edge at all.

In spite of that, this Post Station Town was a land I felt close to and could even call this my second hometown. I cherished the people I encountered on this land.

「Uwah, it's incredible today too.」

After buying the vegetables from Uncle Dora, we got on our way and saw a crowd at the northern end of the marketplace. It was on par with the day of our highest sales four days ago.

With each day that passed, the atmosphere of this crowd felt calmer. The number of southerners and easterners kept increasing, but the westerner bystanders were gradually decreasing.

Time passed in a flash, and we had run this business for half a month now. Having customers lining up was no longer a rare sight, and the southerners and easterners no longer stirred up trouble. Hence, there was no point for the westerners to keep gawking at us. Only one guard from Genos was watching us, and he just stood on one side of the road with a bored face.



「Sorry for the wait! We will start preparations immediately, please give us a moment.」

When we walked over, the customers opened a path as if they prepared for it ahead of time. Even without any instructions, they started to queue up in groups of five in front of the two stalls.

「You're finally here! We were getting impatient!」

Pops, Arudas, and the architects stood at the very fore of the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall.

Pops was shorter than me, while Arudas was as tall and slender as an easterner. Their appearances might look stern and rugged, but they were a short and tall duo that put me at ease.

「Thank you for coming today too. I'm happy to see that you are well.」

「We are lively, but Pops has been naggy for the past two days. He kept saying he wants to eat kiba, and we had a hard time soothing him.」

「It's this brat's fault, he is the one who closed for two days. Hey, you can't close the stall in the Blue month anymore, got it?」

「Yes, I will try my best.」

During our talk, the griddle got heated up.

This was the new kitchenware I bought six days ago, Jaguar-made iron griddle. Ever since my contract started on the 8th day of the Blue month, I had been using it to cook 『Myam-roasted meat』.

I put in some fats, stir-fried thin slices of aria, and then added in marinated loin and belly meat. After they were cooked, I added in more of marinating sauce. The next instant, the fragrance of the fruit wine and the garlic-like myam burst out, and the people in the queue started cheering.

「Hey, is it done yet!? I'm so hungry that my intestines feel as if they are going to snap!」

「Alright, coming right up.」

I pushed the meat that was done to the edge of the griddle instead of plates. This was something that couldn't be done in a pot. As the fire would only heat up the center of the griddle, I could keep the food warm by moving them to the edge and not worry about them getting burned.

After that, I tossed tino shreds onto the crepe-like grilled poitan, wrapped the steaming meat and poitan with it, and it was done.

「Please enjoy, this will be two red copper plates.」

Lala Wu received the copper plates and handed out the 『Myam-roasted meat』 in that order. Arudas took his share and smiled at me.

「Are you going to start doing business at the inn tomorrow?」

「Yes, the plan is to start tomorrow.」

「In that case, we can enjoy your cookings in the afternoon and evening. Our efforts in making scenes in the inn have paid off.」

Thanks to Arudas and the southerners rave reviews of my cooking, the boss of the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 Naudiz decided to sell kiba dishes during dinner.

I bowed towards Arudas and kept cooking 『Myam-roasted meat』 .

「I'm really grateful to everyone. I never imagined that I could expand my business in such a way.」

「Don't mention it, we are not doing this for you. We just want to enjoy a sumptuous dinner.」

「That's right! I won't let you off if you don't serve delicious meals.」

Pops might be rough with his words, but his eyebrows were raised in joy as he held the 『Myam-roasted meat』 with both hands. I couldn't help smiling, and said with a smile: 「I will do my best to meet your expectations.」

After that, we were locked in heated battle. The amount of food that could be cooked in a pot and a griddle was roughly the same; after cooking 15 portions twice, I cooked another batch to make up the shortfall, and the morning rush was over.

Everyone rested after that, ate a light meal, then switched stalls. The members of the 《Silver Vase》 appeared. It was the same familiar routine.

「Asuta, no see so long.」

「Ah, hello, thank you for your patronage.」

The band leader Shumimaru always greeted me this way. The young man with silver hair took off his hood as usual and bowed emotionlessly.

Unfortunately, the one tending to this stall with me right now was Shela Wu, not Vena Wu. Shumimaru bowed towards Shela Wu, and Shela Wu bowed politely in return.

「Are you having 『Myam-roasted meat』 today?」

「No, when stall close, I eat 『Myam-roasted meat』 , today, eat 『Kiba burger』 .」

He spoke like a foreigner, but his pronunciation was very standard. When the denizens of Forest's Edge said 「hamburg steak」 and 「Kiba burger」 , they still sounded stiff. Their culture and speech style was probably very different.

「Asuta, kitchen knife, good?」

「Very good, I'm using it very smoothly now. How should I put this, this knife is sturdier than the knives from my hometown. As a half-baked chef, I'm very grateful.」

「Asuta, you half-baked?」

「Yes, my skills are still lacking, and this is the first time I'm running a stall.」

I answered as I finished my preparation for the five portions of 『Myam-roasted meat』 for the band members.

Shumimaru opened his high cornered eyes slightly wider.

「Asuta, cooking, outstanding. I think, very tasty.」

「Thank you, I'm honored to hear that.」

「...Asuta, how you will be, when full-baked? I, in anticipation, tremble.」

Shumimaru narrowed his eyes slightly.

The expressions of easterners rarely changed, but just this subtle movement felt like a gentle smile.

After one of his brethren handed him a 『Kiba burger』, Shumimaru looked around him.

「She, today, not here?」

「She?」

I tilted my head puzzledly, then understood.

「Ah, you mean my house head? She had to do some other work. After all, her main job isn't to do business.」

「... House head?」

「The head of a house. She is the head, I'm a member.」

「I see.」

Shumimaru nodded.

「House head, stone, happy?」

「Ah, yes... she was quite pleased.」

Seeing how flustered I was, Shumimaru narrowed his eyes cheerfully.

「Wonderful. If problem, find me.」

「Alright, thank you.」



After the 《Silver Vase》 left the stall, a familiar customer approached us with a smile.

「Hi, it's crowded today too!」

It was a pretty girl with brown hair and ivory skin. Her thicc body was covered with just a tube top and a long dress around her waist. She was the daughter of the 《West Wind Inn》, Yumi.

「It's been a while, you are by yourself today?」

「Yes, I have been helping out at home since morning. My stomach was rumbling, so I sneaked out.」

The meat which was kept warm at the edge of the griddle gave off a fragrant aroma, and the smiling Yumi sniffled.

「Smells nice! Isn't that myam and fruit wine? This fragrance is more appetizing than the Kimyusu bun. This means that the kiba meat itself is very fragrant.」

「Yes, I think kiba meat goes well with myam.」

「That's right, a lot of dishes make use of myam too... Asuta, did you come up with the seasoning for this dish? You're amazing!」

「Not at all, I'm just a half-baked chef.」

I heard there were chefs in the castle town. That was probably why a half-baked chef like me could get rave reviews in the Post Station Town. I was happy to hear everyone's compliments, but I couldn't get cocky about it.

「There is still some time before noon, how many portions have you sold?」

「Hmm...? Well, about 40 to 50 each.」

「You sold 50 portions so early!? Your business is really good... I want three portions today, I will make my dad taste your dish, no matter what it takes.」

「Huh? You want to let your esteemed father try this dish?」

「Don't address him so respectfully, he is just an inflexible and stubborn old man.」

Yumi crossed her arms over her bountiful breasts and pouted.

「He thinks kiba can't taste good and even says that the tongues of me and my mother turned weird after eating kiba. He is still insisting on that. I will crush his rock brain today!」

「I-I see. Seniors born in Genos still resist the idea of kiba.」

「Not at all. My mom was born and bred in Genos, but my dad only moved here as an adult... Besides, only grandma's and grandpa's generation would be afraid of kiba. My dad just hates kiba for some unknown reason.」

She would need to spend quite a bit of effort to erase this 'some unknown reason' from his heart.

As I watched this westerner girl Yumi sparing no effort to overturn the bad reputation of kiba, I thought she was an irreplaceable existence for the denizens of Forest's Edge.

「... You will be starting work in the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 from tomorrow onwards, right?」

「Ehh? That's right.」

「That is an inn where the southerners frequent, but they also have many westerners as clients. Once they start selling your dishes, more westerners will start eating kiba.」

Yumi told me her prediction, and I was grateful for that.

But her face still looked sullen.

「After everyone starts treating kiba as a common ingredient, the inns that don't provide kiba dishes will fall behind. So I think I need to crush my father's stubborn rock head right now.」

「You might be right... But it will take some time before everyone treats kiba as a normal ingredient.」

「Be it one year or ten years, we will need to keep up with the times. Furthermore, the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 might win over our customers, so we can't let our guard down.」

Was this the so-called business brain? Yumi was more reliable than I expected. Even putting the matter of kiba meat aside, if this girl finds a husband and the two of them inherit the 《West Wind Inn》 together, the future of the 《West Wind Inn》 would be bright.

「I'm going off now! See you tomorrow!」

Yumi left in large strides with three portions of 『Myam-roasted meat』 in hand.

「Okay, it's almost time to grill the next batch of meat. I'm counting on you, Shela Wu.」

「Yes.」

Shela Wu nodded with a serious face.

When the second half starts tomorrow, I will leave the stall for some time and head to the inn to prepare the meals. During that period, Shela Wu would be in charge of making the 『Myam-roasted meat』.

Shela Wu had a tense expression on her face. This job could earn her a salary double that of Vena Wu and the others. I can't fail— her mind was supposedly filled with such thoughts. The denizens of Forest's Edge took an honest and serious attitude towards work, so I definitely could leave this work to her.

「Alright then, I will start grilling.」

Shela Wu placed the aria onto the griddle.

After the aria turned soft, she added the kiba meat and spread out the meat slices so they could be cooked more easily. So far, the amount of aria and meat was fine. She checked the tenderness of the meat and shifted the fillings to the edge of the griddle.

Shela Wu looked towards me as I picked up a piece of meat.

The cooking degree... was just right.

「Perfect.」

After saying that to her with a smile, Shela Wu showed a wider smile than mine.

「I'm really happy. I give thanks to the forest for letting me meet you.」

「Shela Wu, you are exaggerating. You already were very capable.」

「No, it's thanks to you that I could find meaning and joy in tending to the hearth. If you didn't come to Forest's Edge, I would still be wallowing in shame over my powerlessness.」

Shela Wu gazed into the distance.

「I will definitely be able to live more proudly in the future. And so, I'm grateful to Ai Fa for bringing you to Forest's Edge. I want to offer my blessings for you meeting Ai Fa.」

「Thank you.」

I answered Shela Wu honestly too.

*If only Ai Fa never met you*— people like Jiza Wu might think like that, but there were also people like Shela Wu who were thankful about my encounter with Ai Fa. I could be poison or medicine. I had to show my way of living to these two groups properly.

I sorted out my feelings and was about to chop some tino when a regular customer visited. He was the disciple of the elusive Kamyua Yost, Leito.

「Hello, two please.」

The boy was short, had yellowish-brown hair and was always smiling. I looked back into his light-brown eyes and greeted him.



「Hi, thank you for your constant patronage. Is Kamyua working today too?」

「Yes. He came back early in the morning and will probably sleep until noon. He will be shouldering a heavy responsibility and needs to take care of all sorts of preparation work.」

Was the preparation work for escorting a caravan that busy? Never mind, there wasn't any point for me to probe about this. I had something more important to discuss.

「Sorry, can you help me pass a message? After I'm done with the stall, I hope Kamyua can spare some time for me.」

「Oh, that's a surprise, you actually have business with him.」

Leito opened his eyes wide, the innocent smile was still on his face.

「Kamyua will be happy to hear that. I will tell him once he wakes up. He will stay in the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 for the rest of the day.」

「I got it. Thank you.」

The boy's petite figure disappeared on the end of the road that was starting to get crowded.

When he was completely gone, Shela Wu looked at me worriedly.

「Asuta, you have to be careful.」

「Okay. He kept insisting that he respects and likes the denizens of Forest's Edge, so I won't be in danger... I think.」

「Don't guess like that. Forest's Edge can't do without you now. Even if we ignore the other people in Forest's Edge, Ai Fa will be devastated if anything happens to you. Please don't forget that.」

「Don't worry, I'm just going to talk with him.」

Right now, there wouldn't be any problem.

However, I wouldn't know how things would develop in the future.

After the Tsun clan lost their power, what would happen to the relationship between Forest's Edge and the Genos castle? For us who were doing business in the Post Station Town, how would this change affect us? We could only probe around in the dark.

If anything happened to me, the business in the Post Station Town would stop. Maybe the denizens of Forest's Edge would learn the skills to run a business independently after some time. I had to hang on until that time comes before I could disappear or die.

*This isn't just my own life anymore.*

*I need to be more cautious than before*— I also discussed this with Ai Fa yesterday.

The Tsun clan falling from grace didn't mean that all the problems were gone. In order to atone for the crimes of the chief clan, we had to form a normal relationship with Genos castle.

「It's almost noon, let's work hard for the second half too.」

Shela Wu's face still had a hint of worry, despite that, I said that loudly. I then greeted an approaching customer with a smile:

「Welcome!」

## Part 2

Two hours after midday, we started closing shop.

We sold two hundred portions the day after our day off, but we stayed open until the very last moment. However, we got sold out an hour and a half earlier today. We were closed for two days this time, so our business was better than usual.

No matter what, this was a successful new beginning. I headed to the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 happily.

「Thank you for your hard work, Asuta. Kamyua is waiting for you inside.」

After we returned the cart and went through the doors of the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》, Leito received us as usual.

I greeted Milano Mast at the counter and entered the inn together with Vena Wu. I asked Lala Wu and Shela Wu to procure the ingredients for tomorrow, so only Vena Wu and I were here.

「Heya, Asuta, it's been so long. I'm glad you look well.」

Like usual, Kamyua Yost sat at the six-man table at the deepest end of the restaurant. But he wasn't alone, there were two other persons beside him, which was a little troubling for me.

As their backs were facing us, I couldn't see their faces. But no matter who they were, what I wanted to say wasn't something I could say publicly to outsiders.

「Hello, thank you for your patronage earlier... Kamyua, are they your friends?」

「Yes, we were just talking about work. I thought you will drop by a bit later.」

Kamyua Yost showed his signature cheery smile.

There was still an hour or so before our scheduled closing time, so Kamyua Yost was right. Besides, I did hear him mention the word 「work」.

「Are you referring to that escorting job?」

「That's right. We will be passing through the Forest's Edge settlement before taking the eastern highway, it's a big project. This matter involves you too, so let me introduce them to you.」

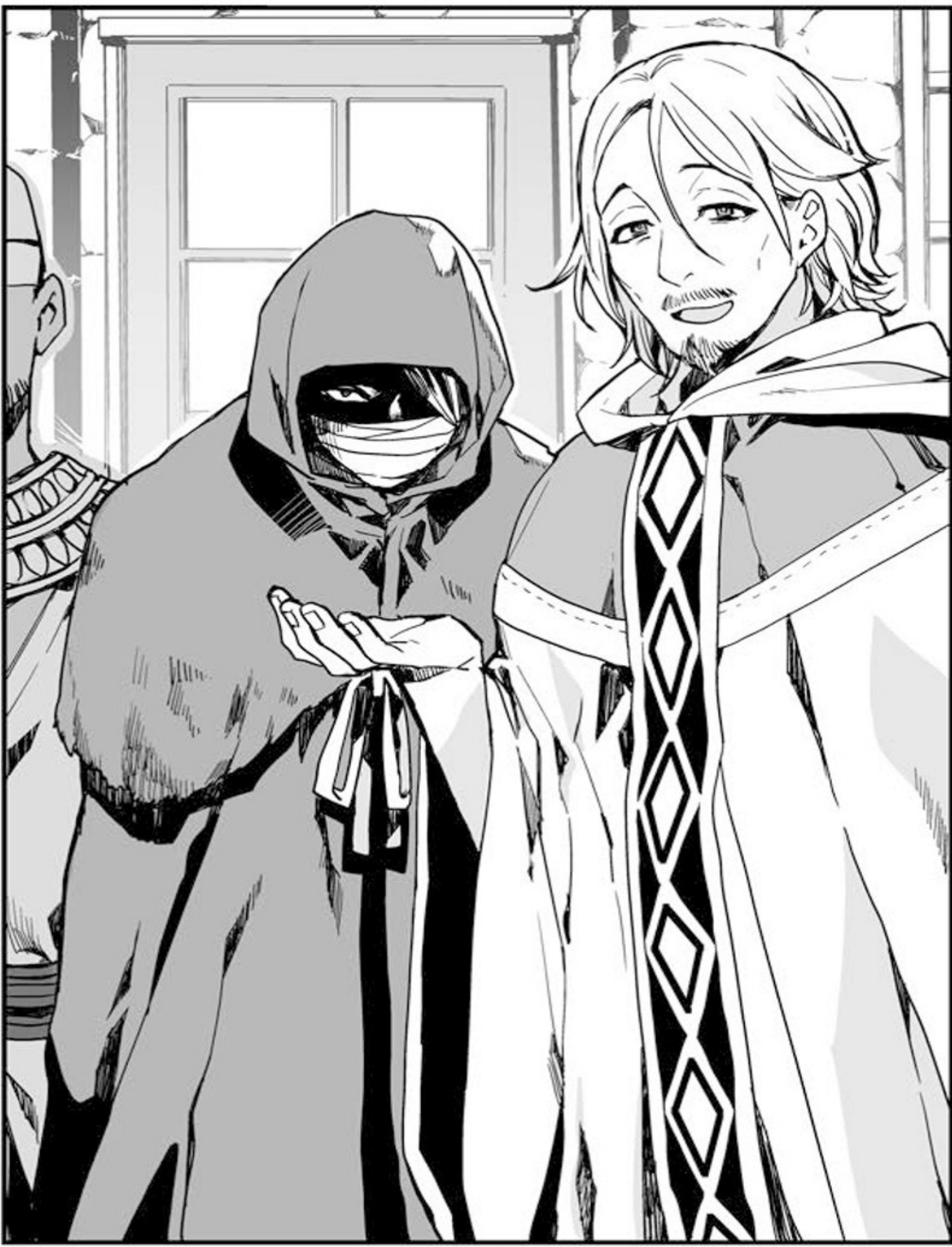
After hearing Kamyua Yost's words, the two of them finally turned our way.

I held my breath in surprise.

The face of one of them shocked me.

However, I didn't actually saw his face. His head was covered in bandages, and the wrappings were even more secure than Darum Wu's when he got injured.





「Sitting at the far end is Han of Dabag, he is a 《Guardian》 like me. The one sitting further in is the leader of the caravan for our expedition to Semu, Zashuma. This is a denizen of Forest's Edge, Asuta. With him is the daughter of a powerful clan in Forest's Edge.」

The bandaged man was Han of Dabag. I had never heard 『 of Dabag 』 before, so that was probably the name of a place.

He was a strange person. He concealed his appearance with bandages, and his reptile-like eyes could be seen through the gaps, his cold and sharp glare made me wary.

He had snake-like eyes like Yamiel had in the past, but lacked Yamiel's viciousness. However, his gaze was ice-cold without a shred of warmth and human emotions. A merciless light shone in his light pale eyes, like that of a blade on a guillotine.

He looked tall, had a buff build, and wore a cloak similar to that of Kamyua Yost that covered his strong body. Normal clothes and waistband could be seen through the front side of his cloak, but he was definitely anything but normal.

「Oh? You are the owner of that kiba stall, right? I only looked at you from afar, I didn't expect you to be so young!」

The other person named Zashuma spoke.

He looked really suspicious. Although Kamyua Yost said that this person was the leader of a caravan, his face looked more like the head of bandits.

His yellowish-brown skin was tanned, his beard and hair were in a deep shade of dark brown, and his eyes were bright brown. His height was average, his body stout and he wore a sand-colored bandana on his head. He wore a sleeveless shirt, baggy pants, and had many accessories hanging on his arms and neck, and dressed like a wealthy man.

「Sorry, but let's stop here for today. Going by our earlier discussions, there don't seem to be any problems.」

After Kamyua Yost said that, Zashuma nodded and got up with ease.

「Since the 《Whirlwind of the North》 Kamyua Yost and 《Double Fangs》 Han of Dabag will be working together, we have nothing to fear! Let's stop with these troublesome meetings and save our energy for the day we set off.」

After being urged by Zashuma, the bandaged Han also stood up slowly.

He then picked up the two blades leaning against the chair and tied them to his waist. They were probably the reason behind his flashy title 《Double Fangs》.

「By the way, you are really a beauty! The girls from Forest's Edge all have outstanding looks, but this is my first time meeting such a sexy lady.」

At this moment Zashuma leaned his face close towards Vena Wu.

「Want to stay in my room until tomorrow morning? For a beauty like you, I'm willing to pay 10 white copper plates.」

「... Are you trying to buy a woman from Forest's Edge with copper plates...?」

Vena Wu cast a flirty sideways glance towards him.

Zashuma wasn't fazed at all and showed an evil smile.

「If you are willing, then of course I will buy. If I pay with money, the hunters from Forest's Edge won't lop off my head, right?」

「Unfortunately... No woman from Forest's Edge will sell their body for copper plates...」

「I see. That's a pity—! I will make a move first. Contact me if anything comes up, 《Whirlwind of the North》.」

「Alright, I got you fam.」

And so, the two men emitting a dangerous aura left the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》.

Kamyua Yost shrugged and gestured for us to sit in the now empty seats.

「Ara ara, I'm very sorry, their characters aren't as bad as they look, they are just too beholden to their desires. They don't have the guts to do anything unreasonable to the denizens of Forest's Edge, so don't worry and laugh them off.」

「I see.」

I sat down where Zashuma was seated earlier, with misgivings still lingering in my heart.

Vena Wu remained standing behind me. The denizens of Forest's Edge didn't have the habit of sitting in chairs.

「Well then, what do you want to tell me? I'm really happy that you took the initiative and came to me.」

Kamyua Yost rested his elbow on the table and leaned forward cheerfully.

I looked at his long face that was pretending to be retarded and continued:

「Sorry, but it's not a pleasant topic. Currently, three tribal chiefs had taken over the Tsun clan's position in leading Forest's Edge, and I'm here today as their messenger. Kamyua Yost, Asuta from the Fa house has a message from the head of the Wu clan Donda Wu, head of the Sauti clan Dali Sauti, and head of the Zaza house Graff Zaza. Will you listen to what I have to say?」

「... What a scary opening speech.」

Kamyua Yost smiled cheerfully and sipped on the zozo tea on the table.

「You have finally stripped the Tsun clan of their chief clan authority, huh? That's a big matter.」

「Excuse me, Kamyua, I want to confirm with you first, have you never heard about this before?」

「How would I know? I'm not a denizen of Forest's Edge and don't have the means of obtaining such information.」

「... Didn't you peek at a wedding banquet in secret last time without anyone finding out? In that case, I think you can sneak into the house head conference that was held two days ago and observe the entire thing from beginning to the end.」

「Yes ~ I understand. I will be frank with you then. I know about the annual house head conference held on the tenth of the Blue month. A relaxed affair filled with alcohol is still fine, but given how tense the house head conference would be, I don't have the confidence to remain hidden the entire time. So I didn't go near the conference venue... Asuta, I'm not underestimating the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

Kamyua Yost's face still looked as if he was pretending to be retarded.

「I see.」

I nodded.

「In that case, let me go on. We have judged that the Tsun clan was not qualified to lead Forest's Edge and relieved them of their authority as the chief clan. The Wu clan, Sauti clan, and Zaza house will rule over Forest's Edge in their stead. The Zaza house might relent this responsibility to their kins, but as of now, these three families will act as our tribal chiefs. I hope you can understand this first.」

「Yes, I got it. I told you before that I have doubts about the characters of the Tsun clan. I will cheer the denizens of Forest's Edge for making this decision.」

「You flatter us... The three tribal chiefs should relay this information to the landlord of Genos, but your party will be carrying out your mission in three days, so I came here to notify you first.」

「Yes, the Tsun clan did promise to lead us through the Forest's Edge settlement. How is their preparation going?」

「Well, first of all, we want to check with you whether we can call it off?」

「That would be troubling for us.」

Kamyua Yost spread his arms exaggeratedly.



「This plan involves a trade route between the western kingdom Selva and the eastern kingdom Semu, you know? Even the Marquis of Genos is keeping a close eye on the progression of this plan. We can't stop it on a whim.」

The plan seemed to be growing in scale. I sighed in my mind. The entire matter wasn't complicated, putting it simply— travelers who wished to commute between Selva and Semu had to make a large detour around the Morga Mountain. If they could go through the Forest's Edge settlement, it could shorten the journey substantially.

「On top of that, the south of Morga is a barren desert, while the north is filled with bandits that target travelers. Both routes are arduous, and people journeying between the east and the west have to risk their lives to do so.」

「I see...」

「If this trial works, we can open a brand new trade route. I think I mentioned this before, there was a group who attempted this, but it ended in failure. The large caravan with over 30 men passed through the Forest's Edge settlement, but when they exited the settlement and were passing the forest leading to the highway, they were attacked by kiba and got wiped out.」

Did he tell me that before?

I think I heard about this, but couldn't remember the details. This must have happened a long time ago.

「Back then, the denizens of Forest's Edge were hard to approach, and the caravan wasn't adequately prepared. We will use that incident as a lesson and will make complete preparations before heading off. We spent two months to prepare for this, and we can't change the schedule now.」

「I see.」

I sighed.

「In that case, there is no other way. The tribal chiefs didn't intend to go back on this agreement either. But if it won't be too much trouble, we were hoping you can reconsider.」

「Alright, that's great.」

Kamyua Yost smiled and took another sip of zozo tea.

「A member of the Tsun clan being our guide is a factor we are worried about. It will be great if another house can take on this role.」

「Regarding this, are you planning to enter the forest through the southern end of the settlement and make your way onto the highway? Donda Wu said that this was the plan you told the Tsun clan.」

「Yes, the northern end will lead to the territory of the bandits anyway. If we go in from the southern end, we can bypass the desert too. I already scouted it out by myself.」

「I see... it might not be nice to say that, but the Tsun clan didn't plan to spend any effort on this and intended to guide you along without any plans. After all, the southern part of Forest's Edge is the turf of the Sauti clan and their kins, so the Tsun clan living in the north probably knows nothing about this.」

「Haha, in order to hog the rewards, the Tsun clan probably didn't inform Sauti clan about this. The Tsun clan falling from grace at a time like this is a lucky break for us.」

Kamyua Yost stroked his beard.

「By the way, is the security in Forest's Edge okay? Even if their crimes got exposed, the Tsun clan wouldn't give in so easily.」

「Yes, there is no need to worry about that. The new tribal chiefs will take responsibility for the management of the Forest's Edge.」

Later in the afternoon, the men from the Tsun clan main house will be sent to the villages in the north. Zuro Tsun will go to the Zaza house, Zattsu Tsun will be moved to the Jean house, while Diga, Doddo, and Tay will be sent to Dom house.

The former clan head Zattsu Tsun was deathly ill and couldn't stand on his own. They didn't have any reason to move him, but they realized that compared to the clan head Zuro Tsun, the branch house members in the Tsun clan village feared the former clan head more. So they put the former clan head onto a wooden board and shifted him to the Jean house.

Donda Wu said coldly: 「If he dies, he dies.」 Unlike Diga and the others, Zuro Tsun and Zattsu Tsun retained their Tsun family name and awaited the day of their execution.

In order to get to the bottom of their other crimes— especially the damage they caused to the citizens of the Post Station Town, they held off on executing them. But no matter what happened, they wouldn't be absolved from their crimes. Everyone has decided that the sin of 「stealing from the forest」 will be paid for with their lives.

My heart felt heavy at the thought of that. Kamyua Yost said with an easy smile:

「Alright then, it looks like I need to have a proper discussion with the Sauti clan. If possible, I hope I can meet them tomorrow.」

「Okay, just name the time and place, I will help you relay the message.」

「In that case, how about meeting in front of your stall at high noon? You can vouch for my identity, and the Sauti clan will feel more at ease, correct? We can then move to the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 to discuss the details.」

After saying that, Kamyua Yost brushed the fringe of his blonde hair.

「When do you plan to tell all this to the Landlord of Genos Marstein? I'm glad that you care about my work so much, but shouldn't you report this to him first?」

「Yes, the tribal chiefs had decided to visit the Genos castle the first thing tomorrow morning.」

「Is that so... You have heard about the way which the Tsun clan communicates with Genos castle, correct? Make sure not to enter from the main gate.」

I already heard about that. Even the Tsun clan couldn't enter the castle town. They had to inform the guards at the rear gate and ask them to pass along the message.

「In the end, even those guys from the Tsun clan never met the landlord directly before. Never mind, that sounds exactly how the people from Rock City work.」

That's what Ludo Wu said during dinner last night.

「Maybe I'm being too naggy, but I still wish to warn you; the landlord delegated the task of liaising with the denizens of Forest's Edge to a man named Pyschkurewuss. He has no respect for hunters, so please be careful.」

「... I understand. I will relay that to the tribal chiefs.」

Donda Wu and Graff Zaza were orthodox hunters. For them, negotiating with the Genos castle would be a more arduous task than dealing with the Tsun clan. The landlord of Genos had undisputed authority over the denizens of Forest's Edge, so we were basically powerless to defy Pyschkurewuss who was acting on his behalf.

「Alright then, that's about it for today then. I'm curious about the crimes that led the downfall of the Tsun clan, but a mere peasant like me doesn't have the rights to probe this far. I will ask the landlord on another day then.」

「... I don't think any mere peasant can seek an audience with the landlord so easily.」

「It's just a coincidence. That's the strange thing about fate too... In this world, the only ones who have dealings with the Genos Marquis Marstein and the denizens of Forest's Edge, are probably just Pyschkurewuss and me.」

Kamyua Yost showed a Cheshire cat-like smile after saying that.

His tone seemed to be suggesting: 「If you have any problems communicating with Pyschkurewuss, you can count on me.」

「...Kamyua, can I ask you something?」

「Hmm? What is it? Don't hold back, ask all you like.」

「My job as a messenger is done. I'm now speaking as Asuta of the Fa house. Our bonds aren't deep enough to call each other friends, but I still want to confirm one thing with you.」

「I do think of you as an important friend though... What is it?」

「Two nights ago, did you help Ai Fa?」

「Hmm?」

Kamyua Yost raised an eyebrow.

「Two days ago, you mean the night of the house head conference? Like I said, I didn't go near the Forest's Edge settlement on that night.」

「Is that true? Since all the house heads were gathered, I don't think you could hide and spy on us. But I think you can conceal yourself in the darkness and watch from afar.」

On that night, Ludo Wu and Shin Wu weren't the only ones observing us, Zwei was also spying on us in the dark. The elusive Kamyua Yost could definitely do the same.

However, Kamyua Yost just showed the same expression and shook his head.

「I told you a long time ago that I want to build a cordial relationship with the denizens of Forest's Edge. After Donda Wu gave me that warning, he will chop off my head if I do anything excessive. You also said that you don't need my help. Under such circumstances, there's nothing to gain for me by going to the house head conference. And so, I suppressed my curiosity and slept in at the inn.」

「I see... Sorry for asking you the same thing repeatedly.」

「Well, I do feel sad that you think I'm a liar. But why did you ask? Did Ai Fa meet with grave danger?」

「Yes. If you were the one who lent her a hand that day, I wanted to thank you properly. But I think that possibility is rather low.」

So it was Tay Tsun who help... No, it was Tay who force-fed Ai Fa the wine and woke her up.

That pitiful man married his daughter to Zuro Tsun, and the Tsun clan main house members treated him as an errand boy.

「I get it now.」

Kamyua Yost muttered softly.

Looking closely, he was squinting his eyes a little, and a curious light appeared in his purple eyes.

「Unfortunately, I'm not Ai Fa's savior. I don't know who that person is, but you should thank him instead.」

「... Alright, I understand.」

His eyes reminded me of Jiba Wu and made me feel anxious. Hence, I decided to take my leave early.

「Well then, I need to go. See you tomorrow at high noon.」

「Yes, to celebrate the new beginning for Forest's Edge, I will quietly raise my wine glass in cheers. Send my regards to Ai Fa.」

## Part 3

We reached the Fa house right between noon and dusk.

I thought I chatted for quite a long time with Kamyua Yost, but we still reached about an hour earlier than scheduled.

「It's been a long time since I last visited the Fa house...」

Vena Wu was carrying a sack of vegetables which she placed at the entrance.

I put down my baggage too, and when I was just about to thank her and bid her farewell, she made a surprised sound:

「Ara... the back of your house seems rather noisy?」

「Oh, that's right. Starting from today, we will be teaching the men around the area how to bloodlet and butcher the kiba.」

Even after giving this explanation, I still had to check the situation. Vena Wu and I went around to the back of the house.

The figures of Ai Fa and six other men appeared before us. Strung up on a tree beside the stove was a kiba weighing about 80 kg.

「Ah, Asuta, you are back.」

「I'm home... That was fast, your group already caught a kiba.」

「Yes, this was caught by the men from the Fou and Von houses. We need to taste it before knowing if the bloodletting was successful.」

Ai Fa's left arm wasn't healed yet, so she couldn't work as a hunter. But she promised the nearby households the day before yesterday that she would instruct them on bloodletting and butchering when they caught one.



*The Fou and Von houses, huh. I remember that the Von house is a kin house of the Fou house.*

As I was thinking about that, the shortest of the six men turned towards me.

He was a middle-aged short man with a slender build. He had messy black hair and a gloomy glow in his dark eyes. His dark-brown skin had deep wrinkles, and he looked a little like a monkey.

「Asuta of the Fa house, you are back early. Are you going to start preparations for dinner?」

「No, I have to start preparing the food for sale tomorrow and will only start dinner when I'm done with that.」

「I see. But the women can learn a lot just by watching you, correct?」

He might look a little gloomy, but he had a proactive personality. I didn't dislike people like him.

But one minor thing bothered me a little. There were two tusks or horns hanging on the chest of this thin man.

The hunting yield by men from smaller houses couldn't compare with Ai Fa, but it was rare to see any man with only two tusks. Even women wore three kiba tusks and horns to ward away danger.

While I was thinking about that, I answered:

「Yes, I will need to prepare a large number of ingredients for my business, so they can learn a lot by observing me.」

When he heard me saying that, he nodded firmly and looked towards Ai Fa:

「Head of the Fa house, before we learn the butchering of the kiba, can I run home and call my woman over? I might not look like it, but I'm quite fast. I promise it won't take much time.」

「That's fine, we will skin the kiba before eviscerating it.」

「I'm very grateful.」

With these words, the small-sized man sprinted right off. He was slower than Dan Lutim but still pretty fast.

「... He just can't seem to keep still. Is he always like this?」

The head of the Fou house, a tall and lanky man asked.

「Isn't he a kin of the Fou house?」

I probed and he answered: 「That's the head of the Sudora house.」

Now that he mentioned it, I remembered that like the Fou, Getsu, and Latzu houses, the Sudora house also supported the Fa house's business. As the Ceremonial Hall was dim, I didn't get a clear look at his face, but I did remember his build was really small.

「By the way, Asuta of the Fa house, will you be teaching us how to prepare dinner too?」

「Yes. I have my own work to do, so I can't impart all my knowledge in detail. But if everyone can learn how to grill poitan, it would be a huge improvement.」

After hearing me say that, the expression of the head of the Fou house changed.

「Poitan, huh... Won't it take quite a bit of effort to turn poitan into that form?」

「Well, it is more tedious than boiling poitan in water. But even if we remove the stench from the kiba, it will be all in vain if the poitan remains the same, right?」

Dishes like 『Myam-roasted meat』 and hamburg steak would need more practice before they could be served on the dining table. But in the beginning, just by learning to grill poitan and serving it with bloodlet kiba, dinner will become much more delicious.

「I don't need to use the hearth much for my preparation work. If you bring your pots and poitan over, you can make grilled poitan here! It will require some effort, but it isn't difficult.」

「... In order to live a prosperous life, the Fou house needs to learn the technique to make kiba tastier. This is for the sake of selling meat for copper plates, but not making dinner more delicious.」

The head of the Fou house said with a troubled face and drooped his brows.

「However... If it is not too much trouble, can I ask you to instruct the women from the Fou and Von house?」

「Of course. I'm going to teach the Sudora house anyway, so it won't be any trouble at all.」

「Hey!」

A man dashed off after hearing his house head's call.

We watched him leave, then Ai Fa asked with her head tilted:

「Are you done talking yet? I have not recovered the strength in my left arm yet, can you help me with the skinning?」

「Of course. Excuse me, I will take care of it right away.」

The head of the Fou house said and then surrounded the kiba with his kins before pulling out their knives.

My heart was filled with emotions as I watched these few houses gathered at the Fa house and working together.

Even though the Fa house wasn't their kin, there were only 500-odd people in Forest's Edge, so everyone had to do their best to work hand in hand with their neighboring tribesmates.

Dan Lutim and Mama Mia Lei called us friends. Kaslan Lutim thought the denizens of Forest's Edge should rebuild their bonds with each other. If our house could bond with the Fou, Von, and Sudora houses, it would be a wonderful thing. Despite Ai Fa's awkward expression, I still thought this was the right thing to do.

「... It's great that the Tsun clan has fallen...」

Vena Wu's sudden murmurs surprised me.

「Ah, Vena Wu, haven't you left yet? Thank you for your hard work today.」

「What do you suggest... That's mean...」

Vena Wu lowered her head slightly and glared at me from below angrily.

「S-Sorry. I was lost in thought... Well then, Ai Fa, I will do the preparations inside. When the women from the Fou and Sudora house are here, please let them in.」

「Alright.」

I took a glance at the kiba that slowly started showing its white flesh and entered my house together with Vena Wu.

「Alright then, let me thank you for your hard work again. I will be counting on you tomorrow too.」

「... Why are you chasing me away...? Asuta, you are so mean...」

「Ehh? Y-You still have work to do, right?」

We closed an hour earlier today, so Vena Wu would usually spend another hour to collect firewood for me.

But she was fidgeting with her chestnut hair and squirming her sexy body right now.

「I don't want to go home... The youngest son of the Tsun clan is in my home right now...」

「Mida is no longer the youngest son of the Tsun clan, you know? I know how you feel, but you should keep business and private matters apart.」

「Of course I know that... but I still can't accept it...」

Vena Wu was devastated. She was as reliable as a man, but she seemed very weak to the presence of Mida.

However, the one who decided this was the clan head Donda Wu, Vena Wu could not escape from this fact. What should we do now? As I was troubling over it with her, a surprising group appeared on the road.

「Asuta, long time no see. Did you already come back from the Post Station Town?」

Kaslan Lutim stood at the fore of the group.

I naturally broke into a smile at the sight of this familiar and dependable figure.

「It's been a while, I never thought I will meet you here.」

They did inform us that they will send an envoy to listen to the conclusion of my discussion with Kamyua Yost, but I didn't expect Kaslan Lutim to come personally.

I couldn't ignore the people behind them either.

The head of the Lei house, Lau Lei, and Yamiel were standing behind him.

「I was thinking of letting them wait for you in the Fa house, but I didn't expect for you to be back so early. Have you met Kamyua Yost?」

Yamiel kept her down, intentionally looking away from us, which worried me a little. Even so, I still answered Kaslan Lutim:

「Yes. They are adamant about carrying out the expedition. If the Sauti clan is willing to be their guide, they hope to have a meeting with the Sauti clan tomorrow to discuss the details.」

I tried my best to relay Kamyua Yost's words as accurately as possible.

After hearing what I said, Kaslan Lutim nodded in acknowledgment.

「I see, we will visit Genos castle first thing tomorrow morning and then meet with that Kamyua Yost. Things are developing as I expected... I will attend the meeting together with the three tribal chiefs.」

「I see! I can rest easy now!」

I said sincerely, but Kaslan Lutim just shook his head.

「That's not true. I'm honored to hear you say that, but I'm just an uncouth man from Forest's Edge. I don't know if I can use the right terms and words when we speak with the people in Rock City. That worries me.」

That might be so, but if any brutes like Donda Wu or Graff Zaza attended the meeting, I feared that blood might be spilled.

Besides... Kamyua Yost would finally meet Kaslan Lutim. Just what kind of impression would that suspicious man give the smart and honest Kaslan Lutim? My heart raced a little just thinking about that.

「Speaking of which, are you going to take in Yamiel, head of the Lei house? 」

When he heard me saying that, the young head of the Lei house nodded firmly.

「It will depend on whether you will agree... And Asuta, watch your words. 」

Oh right, this young man forbade me from using polite speech with him.

Leaving that aside, I was more curious about what he said in the beginning.

「Whether I'll agree? Do you think the Fa house should take her in? 」

「It's the opposite. The Lei house village is closer to the Fa house than the Tsun clan village. This person made an attempt on your lives in the past, so the other house heads kept yammering about not letting her stay too near to your home. 」

I didn't know where the Lei house village was situated. I heard that Ema Min Lutim intended to teach the Lei house women to cook, so that meant the Lei house wasn't too far from the Lutim house. No matter how close it was, it would still be more than an hour's journey away.

Furthermore, the Tsun clan main house was destroyed, so she won't ever harm us again.

「I don't mind at all. She's a girl, so she can't be too dangerous. 」

Yamiel raised her head in surprise.

Her dark eyes stared intensely at my face.

「... I see. I guess Kaslan Lutim was right. 」

Lau Lei flicked up his blonde hair crudely.

「In that case, the Lei house will take in this wicked wench. Hey, if you do anything evil again, I will cut your throat. I won't show any mercy even against a woman. 」

「W-Wait... Kaslan Lutim, what is going on? 」

After hearing my question, Kaslan Lutim lowered his head in apology.

「To be honest, if you didn't agree to the Lei house taking in Yamiel, we would have to leave her to the Zaza or Sauti clan... They will take her in as a prisoner, not as a family. 」

「Prisoner? 」



「Yes. We think that a village from the south or the north, further away from the Fa house, should take her in. But Zaza and Sauti wouldn't agree no matter what. They were only willing to tie up her limbs, and treat her as a prisoner.」

「How can they do this!? This is different from the proposal suggested by Donda Wu, correct?」

「If she showed a submissive attitude, they would gradually grant her more freedom... But since they weren't taking her in as a family member, I suggested letting the Wu clan or Lutim house adopt her, but many of them objected to letting her stay in the same village as Mida or Aura...」

「And so, you chose the Lei house, who is the most powerful house right after the Wu clan and Lutim house.」

A fierce smile appeared on Lau Lei's androgynous face, and he interjected:

「I'm fine with anything, but those people from the north and south are too noisy. Since you are the one who is most at risk, we decided to let you have the final say. On our way here, Kaslan Lutim was certain that you will agree, and he was right.」

「How can you decide a person's future based on my words...」

「What's the problem? This evil wench nearly twisted your fate with a single thought of hers.」

Lau Lei turned his sharp gaze towards Yamiel after saying that.

「Hey, heinous wench, I will confirm with you one last time. Do you swear to live according to the rules of Forest's Edge? Can you treat the Fa house, Lei house and the other people in Forest's Edge as your fellow tribemates and live a proper life?」

Yamiel lowered her gaze momentarily, then looked at me again.

There was still a strong stench of blood on her, which made me anxious.

「Asuta... I tried to ruin the Fa house before. Even though the ones who did the dirty work were Diga and Doddo, I was the one who gave them the meremere leaves and instructed them how to act. If you loath Diga and Doddo, then you should also hate me.」

「Hate, huh... I don't feel such an emotion now. When that incident happened, I hated all of you to the very bones. But Ai Fa and I are both safe, so if you promise not to do it again, I won't bear a grudge.」

Yamiel's gloomy eyes started wavering as if she couldn't suppress her agitated emotions.

She was still expressionless, but no longer had a venomous snake-like aura about her. Only when she raised the corners of her lips in a smile, she did look like a snake-like beauty.

「Hey, that's enough time for you to think it is over. If you have no intentions of living by the rules, be honest about it. I will let you rest in peace with my blade.」

Lau Lei said impatiently.

Yamiel stared into my eyes and said:

「I will obey your words... Although I don't think I deserve any salvation.」

「Hmmp, you are always saying annoying things.」

Lau Lei grabbed Yamiel by her slender jaw and forced her beautiful face to look at him.

「Well then, from henceforth, you are Yamiel Lei. If you dare commit any crimes, I will cut off your head using my authority as the house head. Keep that in mind and work hard to live on.」

「Lau Lei, are you already bestowing the Lei family name to her?」

Kaslan Lutim said in surprise. Lau Lei let go of Yamiel's face with crude movement and grunted.

「I hate those bothersome matters. It doesn't matter if I give her the family name or not, I will decapitate her if she breaks the law. I feel uneasy to have a family member without my family name, I don't like that.」

He was still young and had a fiery personality.

What Yamiel needed now was someone who would push her forward. Hence, I decided to give Lau Lei my honest gratitude.

「Thank you very much, Lau Lei.」

The next instant, he struck the center of my forehead with breakneck speed.

He had the arm power of a hunter from Forest's Edge. I probably blacked out for a moment. When I came to, I was already lying on the ground.

「I already told you, I will punch you if you speak to me with an excessively respectful tone. I won't permit such insolence from you two times in a day.」

「Lau Lei, please stop that. It will be bad if the head of the Fa house saw you do that... Asuta, are you alright?」:

Kaslan Lutim pulled me up with his powerful arm.

My vision was shaking.

「That hurts, I'm probably alright... Hold up! Even if you want to hit, hold back a little! I thought my skull was going to crack!」

「That's right, just speak to me casually like that.」

Lau Lei turned his face away and stuck out his tongue.

I thought he was a more matured version of Ludo Wu... But I had to correct this evaluation, he was more childish than Ludo Wu.

「In that case, I will be candid. Kaslan Lutim is obviously older than you, but he also treats you politely. So why am I the only one who has to suffer? You are the house head, of course I should be more courteous in my speech.」

「Kaslan Lutim will speak in that tone even to a ten-year-old. He's an unfathomable man and only relaxes his tone before the woman he likes.」

「Don't say such things, Lau Lei. I will feel embarrassed too.」 :

Kaslan Lutim furrowed his brows, this was the first time I saw him looking so troubled.

At this moment, I heard a 「Pfft!」 from somewhere.

When she noticed our gaze, Yamiel lowered her head immediately, concealing her mouth with her right hand to hide her expression.

「You are a woman with thick nerves after all...」

Lau Lei turned his head swiftly to the back mid-sentence.

Kaslan Lutim did so at almost the same time.

A group of Forest's Edge denizens was standing about 5 meters from us.

They were two men and four women with iron pots. The two men were the head of the Sudora house and a Fou house member who went off to get the women. I held my breath after seeing their hands on the hilt of their sabers.

「You are the head of the Lei house. Are you following the footsteps of the Tsun clan and decided to make an enemy out of the Fa house?」

The head of the Sudora house said coldly.

I didn't understand what he meant, but Lau Lei just shrugged.

「Oh, you are talking about me punching Asuta, right? Don't be mistaken, retard. Asuta broke a promise, so I gave him his due punishment. The bond between the Wu clan's kins and the Fa house won't be affected by something so trivial.」

Lau Lei suddenly put his left arm around my neck.

「As you can see, Asuta also acknowledged his own mistake. It's all in the past now. If you understand what I am saying, then stop showing such dangerous faces.」

The head of the Sudora house and the Fou house member looked at me probingly.

I don't remember admitting my mistake, but there was no other way but to give in.

「Yes, the relationship between the Fa house and the kins of the Wu clan remains unchanged, don't worry... Alright then, let me teach you how to cook.」

The men finally let go of their blades, and the women sighed in relief.

At this moment, Lau Lei was still holding my neck as he asked:

「You are going to teach everyone to cook? What do you mean?」

「I'm going to teach the women from the Sudora and Fou houses how to grill poitan. Lau Lei, do you want to learn together?」

I was still fuming, so I asked him tauntingly. But Lau Lei's eyes started to shine.

「The way to grill poitan! That's great! We won't need to make the trip to the Lutim house to learn it! Hey, Yamiel Lei, stay here and learn that skill! Then teach the Lei house women when you go back!」

「... Me?」

Yamiel frowned.

Her expressions became more varied than in the past.

「Only the branch house members of the Tsun clan can tend to the hearth. I will be more useless than a ten-year-old child.」

「In that case, you need to train more. You are no longer a Tsun clan member, but a Lei house member.」

Lau Lei finally let go of my neck and knocked my chest with his hand.

「That's how it is, I will be counting on you. Don't worry, if she does anything, I will kill her on the spot.」

「I'm fine with that. But you don't have any poitan on hand, so you can't make it for dinner tonight. The others are all planning to grill the poitan for dinner right here.」

「What!? That's terrible!」

Lau Lei looked at the Sudora house and Fou house members frantically.

「Ah, excuse me, I'm willing to trade for any extra poitan in your house with these tusks and horns! Or you can lend me some, and I will return the exact number to you tomorrow! No, I can give you a few more back!」

「... How many poitan do you need?」

「There are 19 people in the Lei house! I need at least two for each person!」

That would mean almost 40 poitan.

The head of the Sudora house shook his head solemnly while the Fou house member whispered to the women behind him.

「... The Fou and Von house can lend you the poitan first. But it is a hassle to buy them from the Post Station Town, so we hope you can return the same number of poitan to us tomorrow.」

「I see! Then safekeep these tusks and horns, I will exchange them with the poitan tomorrow.」

「The Fou and Von houses, I owe you one!」

One of the women turned and ran back the way she came from.

Lau Lei had a satisfied smile, and even Kaslan Lutim was smiling wryly.

Yamiel still kept her head low, her long hair hiding her face.

「... I think your punishment of the Tsun clan is too lenient...」

I heard a soft voice from behind.

I turned around and was dumbfounded.

「Oh right, Vena Wu, were you still here?」

I then felt someone pinching my arm with all their might. And Yamiel who had gotten the Lei family name will live on as Yamiel Lei.

## Part 4

「Today was really tiring.」

After finishing dinner, Ai Fa laid down on the rug.

Ai Fa usually maintained a determined attitude until she fell asleep. It was rare seeing her showing such a lazy side of her. I cleaned up the dinner and asked:

「What's the matter? You spent the entire day teaching the men from the Fou and Sudora houses how to bloodlet and butcher, right? Was there anyone who was hard to deal with?」

「Not really. No one looked down on me because I'm a young girl, so I worked really hard... which made me even more tired.」

Ai Fa laid on the ground lazily with her hair down and continued grumbling:



「After interacting with the arrogant men from the Tsun and Wu clans, I think their attitude is completely different from that of a major clan.」

「It feels wrong to compare the Wu clan to the Tsun clan... Ai Fa, you have mostly interacted with the people from the Wu clan main house.」

Before the Lutim house wedding, I spoke with the hunters from the Wu clan branch houses before, and the men from the Fou and Sudora houses had an aura similar to them. They were the typical quiet and forthcoming Forest's Edge men. I could sense their stubbornness from their actions and the sincerity they had towards their own work.

「With that in mind, the men from the main house of a major clan are somewhat unique. 『Arrogant』 sounds a little dismissive, but I can feel the pride and confidence from their body... I wouldn't ever want to make an enemy out of them.」

「Hmm. I would rather compete with them with my pride on the line. Anyway, this was really tiring.」

Her voice sounded so tired that I couldn't help laughing. Ai Fa glared at me and asked:

「What's so funny?」

「Sorry, sorry. People like that are called 'heroes in turbulent times'. Just like Donda Wu who will only show his true abilities during a crisis.」

「... Don't compare that brute with me.」

Ai Fa pouted and averted her head.

After I finished cleaning up, I sat down beside Ai Fa. I came home a bit earlier today, so I could finish my preparation work before dinner.

「That's not what I mean. You haven't hunted for a long time and can't find a place to vent your energy... And no one had ever asked you for anything, so you can't calm down when you have to work with others.」

Ai Fa who had turned her head away looked at me unhappily again.

「You looked a little too happy. Why are you so happy to see me exhausted?」

「Uwah~ you are really in a bad mood. I wouldn't do that, would I?」

Ai Fa spent two years alone, and I felt happy seeing her making friends normally.

The powerful hunters from the Wu clan, Zaza house, and other houses might be filled with contempt for Ai Fa. They thought a woman shouldn't do the work of a hunter and felt repulsed by the idea of a female hunter. However, the people from the minor houses just treated Ai Fa as a house head.

After the Fa house started doing business in the Post Station Town, we obtained immense wealth. But long before that happened, Ai Fa already did her job as a hunter properly. The shiny snow-white tusks and horns before her chest were proof of it. Those who often endured the hunger knew best how difficult it was to hunt alone without the help of any family or kin.

If she didn't possess the capability to hunt kiba alone, even if she used the fruits that attracted kiba, she would just end up dead in the forest. Ai Fa had shown her prowess as a hunter. The men from the minor houses didn't take her lightly, and even respect her as an outstanding hunter.

「Ai Fa, you will get used to such a life after a while. In the past, everyone shunned you out of fear of the Tsun clan, which was abnormal. I think you have gotten back on the right track.」

「... Not really. The Fa house's relationship with the other houses had always been weak. If not because of the bloodletting and butchering lessons, we won't get involved with them either. Therefore, you are the one who created such a situation.」

「Oh, so I'm a bother to you?」

「I didn't say that! I think you have brought happiness to the Fa house!」

She was praising me, but her tone was rather pointed.

Never mind, if she said that in a gentle tone, I would just get embarrassed.

「Oh right, regarding Yamiel... no, Yamiel Lei, was that really fine? I made the decision by myself, so I feel a little uneasy.」

「Hmmp.」

After hearing what I said, Ai Fa turned her face away again. She continued to lie on the floor, and her tone sounded disagreeable.

「There's no point in me saying anything since it has been decided... Besides, that woman has already achieved her goal, so she won't do anything dangerous.」

Yamiel Lei's goal was the ruin of the Tsun clan.

For those who didn't know her goal, she seemed more dangerous than Diga or Doddo. However, I didn't think she had any reason for any further intrigues.

「Even so, you are really friendly towards someone who attempted to set you up in the past. I can't understand why you did that.」

「I-I'm not friendly at all. My attitude towards her is no different from the other women.」

「Is that so? I think you were sticking very closely to her?」

「That's because her culinary skill is the worst. As the Tsun clan main house let the branch house tend to their hearth, this was inevitable.」

Ai Fa kept her head turned away and glared at some direction.

The silence was quite unnerving.

「I told you before, Yamiel Lei has kiba blood stench on her. I had a hard time today since I had to become a mouth breather. I didn't stand beside her because I wanted to.」

「... So it will be all settled if that stench is gone, right? The Lei house won't permit her to perform the archaic ritual of pouring kiba blood over herself.」

「What's settled? Ai Fa, I don't understand why you are so mad.」

「I'm not mad!」

「Your face and voice tell me you are absolutely mad!」

There was no end if we keep arguing.

It was my fault. Ai Fa was already exhausted, so I shouldn't have mentioned Yamiel Lei.

「Never mind, house Lutim and the others will teach Yamiel how to cook next time, I won't see her for some time. Oh right, I have something more important to report.」

「What is it? My head is starting to hurt. If it is complicated, then tell me tomorrow.」

「It's not complicated at all. I want to raise the wages for the women helping out at the stall. Are you fine with that?」

Ai Fa flipped over, and her body was now facing me.

「I will let you decide, but can you tell me the reason?」

「Okay. Our business had only started half a month ago, but the Wu clan women learn really fast. Not just Shela Wu but also Vena Wu and Lala Wu are indispensable employees. If I wanted to hire other women, I think it will be unfair to pay everyone the same wages. To make this difference distinct, I think we should raise the remuneration of the Wu clan women.」

「You are planning to get other women to help?」

「Yes. I need to tell you about this. It appears I was mistaken.」

This was related to the work in the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 that would start tomorrow.

As Shela Wu could hold the fort in my stead, I thought I could head to the inn without any worries at noon. However, everyone advised me to not move around alone.

The threat of the Tsun clan could be gone, but there were still ruffians in the Post Station Town. These ruffians wouldn't dare lay their hands on denizens of the Forest's Edge, out of fear of their retribution. But with my scrawny appearance, they might not think of me as a denizen of Forest's Edge— Kaslan Lutim did warn me about that when I first started the stall.

「Hence, when I head to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, I will be accompanied by one woman. However, there would only be one person tending to each stall, which makes me feel uneasy. So I decided to hire more helpers.」

Ai Fa stretched her upper body on the rug and asked quizzically:

「And then?」

「Since the helper just needs to come over in the afternoon for a few hours, I decided to pay them half the usual amount— three red copper plates for half a day's work. I felt bad about the newbie getting the same salary as Vena Wu and the others. Besides, I always felt that the pay is too low, so I want to use this chance to improve the work conditions.」

When we just started the business, manpower cost was a problem. Well, well, well; how the turntables.

「First of all, Vena Wu is paid 6 red copper plates, I intend to adjust it to 9 plates. I was planning to increase Shela Wu's wages to 12 red copper plates, but now, I want to amend that to 15 plates. What do you think?」

「I'm fine with anything, just do what you want... But whom are you asking to help? Another woman from the Wu clan?」

「No, the Wu clan is the new chief clan, and they have their hands full right now. Mama Mia Lei also thinks the wealth should be distributed equally, so I asked the minor houses like the Fou and Sudora to help... When I said that, the head of the Sudora house was the first to agree. He hopes he can send a woman from his house to help from tomorrow onwards.」

How should I say this, that small and gloomy house head had a strong urge to climb out of poverty. I could feel his strong urge to leave his impoverished lifestyle behind.

「Head of the Sudora house... Two infants from the Sudora house starved to death. Their kins got wiped out too, and if this went on, they could only beg for a house not related to them to take them in and become a member of another house.」

「I see. Then I want to give them this job even more. If there is a chance, I also hope the other houses can assist us.」

「...」

「Hmm? What is it?」

「... We faced many dangers, but we also gained a lot from the house head conference. No one will call you a poison of Forest's Edge anymore.」

Ai Fa's voice that sounded a little peeved has reverted to normal.

「That's hard to say. At the very least, Jiza Wu and Graff Zaza don't think so.」

「Is that so. Let me rephrase that, fewer people in Forest's Edge think of you as a poison.」

It would be great if she was right.

But our future was still filled with uncertainty.

It had been half a month since the opening of our stall. Business was flourishing, but we haven't reached our goal of 「Turning kiba meat from ready-sold-food into a merchandise」 yet.

「In order to not let them think of me as poison, I have to work hard. Starting with the new job tomorrow.」

「Yes.」

Ai Fa nodded, then pivoted on her elbows and moved her body closer to me.

She rolled on the floor and looked up at my face from a close distance.

「... I also heard that Donda Wu will be going to the castle town tomorrow.」

「Yes, I hope things end peacefully. I'm looking forward to Kaslan Lutim's skills.」

「Yeah... But the people in the castle only know the depraved Tsun clan and will see Donda Wu and the others as a threat. That's a headache.」

Ai Fa stretched her left hand towards me as she said that.

I tilted my head puzzledly when I saw her slender fingers pointing at my nose. Ai Fa called out to me:

「Hand.」

「Yes, that's your hand.」

「No, I'm telling you to give me your hand.」

Give her my hand? What did she mean?

As I was thinking about that, Ai Fa grabbed my right hand with a slightly flustered expression.

She placed my right palm on the side of her head, on her temple covered by her beautiful blonde hair.

「My head is starting to hurt. Lend me your hand for a while.」

I didn't think my palm had any headache healing properties, but after seeing the satisfied face Ai Fa was making with her eyes closed, I couldn't find any reason to object.

*She looked really exhausted, we should turn in for the day...* As I was thinking about that, Ai Fa said quietly:

「It has been so long since I slept with you in the Fa house. The Wu clan treated us with hospitality... But this is still my home after all.」

「Of course. You spent 17 years in this house.」

「Yes, and you are also a member of the Fa house. Asuta, I can't imagine life without you now.」

When I heard Ai Fa saying that, I couldn't help feeling my heart racing.

Ai Fa continued in a softer voice:

「However... I will feel irritated if there are more family members. Can I act like a proper house head when the time comes?」

「More family members? What do you mean?」

I realized after saying that:

「Are you referring to what Vena Wu said yesterday? I have told plenty of times that I don't plan to marry anyone.」

Ai Fa didn't reply.





Because she stirred up my feelings, I couldn't help continuing:

「If you say that, then it's the same for me too... If you take in a husband, I also can't give you my blessings and will feel that the future is pitch black. So we are even, right?」

Ai Fa opened and shut her mouth weirdly.

「I see. You are a really strange man.」

「Same to you.」

Was that really so? I lowered my head and thought as I answered.

Under the constraints of many factors, I decided to hide my admiration of Ai Fa deep in my heart. If it escaped my bonds, I probably wouldn't be able to suppress my feelings. And so, I decided to stay by Ai Fa's side as a family member.

What were Ai Fa's thoughts about this?

Just what kind of thought process prompted Ai Fa to tell me: 「I don't wish the number of family members to increase」?

*As a house head, she probably just doesn't want to increase her burden.*

Never mind, this was better than her letting me take anyone I wish into the house through marriage. I decided to tell myself that.

As I was thinking about such things, Ai Fa was breathing steadily.

## Chapter 2 - Embroiled in Disputes Once Again

### Part 1

The next day, we reverted to our usual condition and prepared 60 『Kiba burgers』 and 90 servings of 『Myam-roasted meat』.

When we stayed over at the Wu clan village, there were many people who helped me. But that wasn't so when we returned to the Fa house. Fortunately, work efficiency also improved after we bought the iron griddle, so I could still prepare a bit more portions. But we didn't sell everything when we prepared this amount of food, so I held back from making too many.

If the merchandise got sold out, getting to close early wasn't a bad thing either. If the business went smoothly, maybe other inns would order from us as well. To get ready for this, I had to continue to train and increase the menu.

Business at the stall was successful today too. After the morning rush was over, we started preparing for the second half when a woman from Forest's Edge approached us.

「Hmm? What's the matter? Your work starts in the afternoon.」

「Yes, I came early. I wanted to have more chance to practice.」

The person before us was a woman from the Sudora house, she would be helping out at the stall from today onwards.

Her name was Rii Sudora, she was the wife of the Sudora house head.

She was tall, slender and had an outstanding look. Her dark hair ended tidily at her chest. She had dark blue eyes. The head of the Sudora house was about 45 years old, and she seemed to be half his age.

「Are your house chores fine? You won't be paid more even if you come early, you know?」

Lala Wu said without holding back, and Rii Sudora smiled calmly.

「Of course. I already did my house chores. It's a rare chance for me to assist Asuta of the Fa house, I'm honored to do so and hope to be of help as soon as possible.」

She had an elegant air about her and was as proactive as her spouse.

That made me really happy.

「Alright then, please head over to that stall to learn. Lala Wu, sorry for trading places again, I'm going over.」

「Okay～」

Lala Wu and I were tending to the 『Kiba burger』 stall, and I was now heading to the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall. I said to Vena Wu:

「Sorry, Rii Sudora is here, so I will look after the 『Myam-roasted meat』 for now. Vena Wu, please take care of the 『Kiba burger』 stall.」

Vena Wu faced away coldly and walked to the 『Kiba burger』 stall.

After I neglected her yesterday, she was in a bad mood.

It was rare seeing Vena Wu mixing her private emotions into the work, which meant I really upset her. I felt bad and guilty about that.

「Shela Wu, this is Rii Sudora. Like I explained in the morning, she will be coming over in the afternoon to help. Please take care of her.」

「Alright.」

Shela Wu acknowledged with her eyes, and Rii Sudora also said with her head bowed: 「Please to meet you.」

「After the customer places an order, Shela Wu will start making the meal. Please take two red copper plates from the customers before giving them the dish. We haven't met any dine dashers yet, but please take the copper plates first... And also observe what Shela Wu is doing, I will need you to help prepare the meal in the future.」

「Yes.」

Rii Sudora didn't speak much, but she looked honest and sincere and wasn't too timid or headstrong towards the people from the Wu clan. I had a great first impression of her.

At this moment, another visitor from Forest's Edge arrived. He was Kaslan Lutim.

「Hmm? You are really early.」

Both Rii Sudora and he were scheduled to visit at noon.

Kaslan Lutim bowed to the two ladies and then waved at me.

「Asuta, we have finished our discussion with the man from the castle called Pyschkurewuss, so I came here to intrude. Do you have some time to spare?」

「Yes, I understand... Shela Wu, please watch over things for now. Please demonstrate when the first customer is here.」

I was curious as to why Kaslan Lutim was in the Post Station Town.

When they realized that a Forest's Edge man had appeared on the streets, a hint of wariness appeared in the eyes of the pedestrians. We decided to leave the stall and entered the woods behind the stall.

「Sorry for interrupting your work, but I wanted to listen to your opinion as soon as possible. Donda Wu and the others didn't come into the Post Station Town and are hiding in the bypass.」

「It's fine, I'm worried about this too... What is your impression of Pyschkurewuss?」

「Simply put, he is difficult to deal with. He demands us to hand over everyone from the Tsun clan.」

「Ehh?」

「The law in Genos prohibits anyone from stealing the resources of the Morga mountain. He said that the criminals who violated this law have to be sentenced by Genos.」

Kaslan Lutim's face was solemn as usual.

However, there was a stern light in his dark blue eyes.

「He has a point... Is he demanding for everyone from the Tsun clan main house, not just the clan head and former clan head?」

「No, he means everyone who violated the law. That includes the branch house members too, all 41 Tsun clan members.」

His demand was far beyond my expectation.

After being stunned for a moment, a fiery rage burst out in my chest.

「They ignored the misdeeds of the Tsun clan all the while, and they are turning their backs so quickly now. What did the tribal chiefs say?」

「Graff Zaza was enraged and even wanted to abandon Morga.」

「... What?」

「He thinks the landlord of Genos isn't worthy of our blades. In that case, we should seek out a new Forest's Edge like our ancestors did 80 years ago... That's what Graff Zaza thinks.」

「H-He thinks we should abandon the Forest's Edge of Morga? But why...」

「That's how far we distrust Pyschkurewuss. Graff Zaza was just saying that on the spur of the moment, but I understand how he feels... Pyschkurewuss looked at us as if he was appraising feral beasts..」

I was speechless.

The representative of the Genos landlord was actually opposed to the denizens of Forest's Edge.

「Pyschkurewuss gave us ten days to think it over. We will need to make a choice by the 23rd of the Blue Month.」

「You are not thinking of handing Yamiel Lei and the branch house members to Genos, right?! That completely contradicts the path which the denizens of Forest's Edge had chosen!」

I shouted emotionally.

「The unreasonable siding of people from the Genos with the Tsun clan was the reason for the depravity of the Tsun clan. The branch house members were merely forced into obedience by the main house, so I won't allow them to be treated as criminals unfairly.」

The denizens of Forest's Edge were involved in assaulting travelers, abducting the women of the Post Station Town and robbing crops. Milano Mast also claimed that a denizen of Forest's Edge murdered his friend. But no matter how many times the citizens from the Post Station Town complained, the people from the Genos castle didn't mete out punishment to the denizens of Forest's Edge.

And now, they wanted to execute all the Tsun clan members for a single crime. Of course, we couldn't let him do that.

「If the people from the Genos castle punished the Tsun clan right from the start, the citizens of the Post Station Town wouldn't have suffered, and the denizens of Forest's Edge wouldn't be viewed with fear and disdain. Even though those people from the castle didn't try the Tsun clan for their past crimes, they want to execute the entire Tsun clan in order to cover the entire thing up. Those tyrants just want to wipe out the Tsun clan for their own self-interest, this has nothing to do with the law.」

After saying all that, I suddenly snapped out of it.

「... Sorry for getting so emotional. I was just venting, please don't take it to heart.」

「It's alright, I feel the same way too... And I finally understand Ludo Wu's words.」

「Huh? What did he say?」

「He said that when you were assaulted by Doddo and Tay in the Tsun clan village, Ludo Wu thought that your worried look for Ai Fa was just like a hunter. So you have such a wild side too.」

Vena Wu said the same thing recently.

Did the violent nature of the Forest's Edge rub off on me after consuming kiba for such a long time? I didn't realize it at all.

「No matter what, we just need to follow our hearts and seek out the most correct route... Asuta, why don't you participate in the meeting with us next time.」

「That wouldn't be right, I'm not the kin of a tribal chief clan...」

「That's true. I shouldn't let you carry such a heavy burden. Sorry for disrupting your work.」

And finally, Kaslan Lutim showed a refreshing smile as he looked towards the stall where Shela Wu and the others were working hard.

「The Post Station Town residents are paying copper plates to the denizens of Forest's Edge to buy food made from kiba. I heard about the results of your business before, but now I'm seeing it personally— this is really unbelievable. Now that you achieved such an incredible performance, I won't let your effort go to waste.」

His gaze shifted behind me.

「Well then, it is almost time. Sorry for making you come all the way here.」

I turned in surprise, and a slender figure emerged out of the woods.

「Hello, I should be the one apologizing. You two seem busy, is everything fine now?」

Kamyua Yost appeared before us.

I glared at the fake innocent smile of his.

「Kamyua, why are you always trying to give me a fright? That's rude and will trouble us.」

「Sorry about that, I didn't mean to scare you. I'm not eavesdropping on you either. I don't have the guts to listen to the conversations of a hunter who is fully alert.」

Kamyua Yost wore a long leather cloak, and he approached us with his usual nimble strides.

Even though Kamyua Yost was taller, his build couldn't be compared to Kaslan Lutim at all. Kaslan Lutim had the ideal proportionate body in Forest's Edge, while Kamyua Yost was as scrawny as a praying mantis. They stood three meters apart from each other.

「You must be Kamyua Yost.」

「Yes, I make my living in the western kingdom as a 《Guardian》. And you... are not the head of the Sauti clan, correct?」

Kamyua Yost spied on the wedding of Kaslan Lutim in the past, and there was no way he would have mistaken the star of that banquet.

Kaslan Lutim answered calmly:

「Yes, I'm Kaslan Lutim of the Lutim house, a kin of the Wu clan. The head of the Sauti clan, Dali Sauti is waiting for you over yonder.」

「It's an honor to meet you, Kaslan Lutim.」

Kaslan Lutim's blue eyes were like a calm ocean, but there was a strong will in his gaze. Kamyua Yost's purple eyes were pure like belonging to a toddler but clear like that of an elderly. They looked right at each other.

Neither side showed any hostility or malice and looked a little too calm. But there was still a curious air about them, like two different type of powerful animals sizing each other up.

「Not just Dali Sauti, the three tribal chiefs are all waiting over yonder. This is a good chance, would you like to speak with them?」

「I'm honored that the denizens of Forest's Edge think of this as an important task. Please observe my character thoroughly.」

Kamyua Yost smiled with satisfaction.

Kaslan Lutim had a faint and calm smile.

「Alright then, let us be off. Thank you, Asuta.」

「Ah, okay.」

「Farewell, Asuta. Later, I will send Leito over, so don't sell out before then.」

「... Right. If you want to buy 『Kiba burger』, please come early.」

The two men with completely opposite personalities left quietly.

I felt a little dazed.

*Whenever I see Kamyua meet a man from Forest's Edge, I would break out in cold sweat. Kaslan Lutim is calm and collected, so I won't need to worry. But what about Graff Zaza?*

Several days before the Lutim house wedding banquet, Kamyua Yost suddenly appeared in the Forest's Edge settlement. I was so shocked that my lifespan probably shortened.

Darum Wu's eyes were burning like a wounded wolf's as he pointed his blade at Kamyua Yost. Donda Wu was unexpectedly calm, but the men from the Wu clan branch houses all looked sinister...

*Oh right, he already told Donda Wu about the caravan back then.*

Kamyua Yost was wandering around Forest's Edge by himself because of this project. He then started looking for Ai Fa and me whom he just happened to meet in the Post Station Town and appeared in the Wu clan village. That happened 20 days ago.



... Hmm?

At this moment, a seed of doubt flashed across my mind.

However, I didn't know where this suspicion came from. It felt like I overlooked something important... Maybe I overheard something that wasn't too important when I was preparing for the wedding banquet...

*Did someone say something? Was it Kamyua? Or Donda Wu?*

No matter how hard I racked my brain, I couldn't find the answer.

With no other choice, I headed back to the stall.

Since Kamyua Yost was here, that meant it was almost noon. The newcomer Rii Sudora just joined us, so I couldn't just dump all the work on Shela Wu.

*I need to focus on work. Let's start by preparing the food for the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.*

There was still a little bit of dissonance in my mind, but it couldn't be helped since I wasn't able to recall. I decided to worry about it later and rushed back to the stall.

And a few days after the incident was over, I finally remembered why there were some doubts in my mind.

## Part 2

Nothing out of the ordinary happened after that, so Vena Wu and I headed to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 at noon.

「Asuta, I have been waiting for you.」

The innkeeper Naudiz had a gentle expression on his stern face as he came out to receive us. He had ivory skin, a stout build, brown hair and green eyes. He was a mixed blood of the south and west.

The 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 was to the south of 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》, situated between several other inns. It was larger than the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》, and was twice as wide as a small inn despite being a double story building, and could accommodate nearly one hundred customers.

「This is the kitchen. Please use it as you wish until my wife comes over.」

「Alright, thank you.」

The scale of the kitchen was similar to the stove room of the Wu clan, about two tatami mats big. Three stoves were placed on the inner wall of the room, the items of kitchenware were hanging on the wall, and there was a shelf full of crockeries as well as a large worktable at the back. It looked really spacious.

Not only were we free to use the kitchenware and stove, we could also take as much water and firewood as we needed. I laid out the ingredients I prepared ahead of time, then instructed Vena Wu: 「Please start a fire in two stoves.」

We were given two-and-a-half hours to cook. Even if we exceeded the time, we could stay as long as we needed provided we didn't get in the way of the inn's work. But Vena Wu would work overtime if we don't return to Forest's Edge punctually, so we couldn't take things slowly.

「Oh~, so such a large piece of meat is needed for 40 or more portions.」

Naudiz seemed to be planning to observe me and sat on the other end of the working platform as he watched my hands.

「This is meat from the kiba's torso, correct?」

「That's right. In my hometown, this part is called the pork belly. This is taken from the chest after chopping off the ribs.」

I prepared enough belly meat for 45 portions, weighing about 10 kg. After cutting it into six large pieces, I chopped them into small cubes, cleaned away the pico leaves meant to preserve the meat, and laid the meat onto the working platform.

I prepared 40 arias to complement the 10 kg of kiba meat. Other than that, I also used 4 fruit wines, 20 arias and about three-fifths of a Tau sauce bottle. Tau sauce was the new seasoning I got from the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》. The ingredient cost ratio was 27.5%. Since the Tau sauce was expensive, I only used the cheap aria for the vegetable part, so the ingredient cost percentage was roughly the same as for the light meal stall.

The new dish I prepared for the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 was 『Braised kiba』<sup>1</sup>.

Since I decided to prepare braised meat, I wanted to use carrots and hard-boiled egg to complement the dish. Unfortunately, I couldn't find any similar ingredients in the Post Station Town. In my old place the 《Tsurumi Restaurant》, we augmented the braised pork with onions. Hence, I didn't hesitate in using aria which was more nutritious. The biggest reason why I chose this dish was that it went well together with the aria.

A few days ago, I let Naudiz try some samples. He loved the 『Braised kiba』 that used generous servings of Tau sauce and approved of it immediately.

I quickly started cooking.

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1 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kakuni>

I already tenderized the meat at home and softened it. I picked up the meat and walked to the stove.

「Thank you, the pot is heated up.」

This kind of performance was expected for a pot intended to use commercially. The pot in this kitchen was one size bigger than the ones in Forest's Edge. To start things off, I put three pieces of meat into the pot.

「What a generous serving. It smells nice.」

Naudiz smiled calmly.

Vena Wu stood on the other side and stared at the pot which was full of water. She still looked peeved. It felt so long since I last heard her intentionally speak slowly with her sexy voice.

As the person accompanying me would double as my guard, I decided to take Vena Wu instead of the young Lala Wu. I didn't expect to anger her the day before the job and that she would still be fuming now.

What should I do to improve Vena Wu's mood? As I was troubling over that, I checked if the meat was done.

The meat turned out just right - it had a dark shade of brown. In order to seal in the flavor, I always seared the surface of the meat, be it at home or in the restaurant.

That wasn't all, this would remove the excess oil too. The belly meat had plenty of fats, so this process was very important.

「Hmm, it's almost done. The water in the other pot is also boiling.」

I scooped up as much fats as I could, then dropped the belly meat that had been seared into the boiling water.

After searing the rest of the meat and dropping them into the boiling water, I started clearing away the foam which was on the water surface.

When most of the foam had been cleared, I adjusted the intensity of the fire to medium and covered the water with lilo to remove the gamey taste.

Most people would use garlic or ginger to do so, but I couldn't find a substitute for that in this world. Myam that tasted like garlic was too strong, so it was time for lilo which was used for making jerky to shine.

Lilo had the appearance of large ferns, and I used them to cover the surface of the boiling water. If the simmering meat floated up from the water, the exposed surface would become very tough. And so, lilo also acted as an inner lid.

I planned to let the meat stew for an hour and take my time to prepare the other ingredients.

「Alright then, I will start making the braising sauce. Vena Wu, please help me keep the meat under the lilo and maintain the fire intensity.」

Silence.

Expressionless.

Even so, I believed that Vena Wu would do her job properly.

Making braising sauce was simple. I just had to crush the aria that would add to the flavor. There was a tool that let me do that. It was some kind of shell covered in spikes.

The round shell was milky white, and about 10 cm wide. This was probably the shell of a crab-like creature. I didn't know anything more about it.

「Oh right, is there a way to purchase Tau sauce periodically?」

I asked as I crushed 20 or so arias, and Naudiz nodded.

「Yes. I asked a traveling peddler to help me procure some. He was shocked when he learned that we will use three bottles in five days.」

That was a normal reaction since Tau sauce wasn't cheap.

The bottle containing Tau sauce was roughly the size of a fruit wine bottle, about 1 liter. A bottle cost 10 red copper plates. That would be 30 red copper plates for five days.

Tau sauce was a specialty product from the southern kingdom of Jaguar— a seasoning made from fermenting Tau beans. Genos didn't produce them locally and had to import them from Jaguar, resulting in this high price.

Because Tau sauce was expensive, only restaurants that hosted Jaguar customers like the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 in the Post Station Town would import them. Although Tau sauce was a seasoning often used for home cooking, it became a luxury product in the west.

I wanted to exploit the existence of the Tau sauce because its taste was too similar to that of soy sauce. It had the appearance of a thick paste and had plenty of salt and alcohol added as preservatives, and the taste of these two ingredients was very strong. Aside from that, it was no different from soy sauce.

When I first encountered the Tau sauce in the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, I was overwhelmed with joy. If it wasn't so close to the house head conference, I would probably irritate Ai Fa with my happiness. But that didn't stop me from feeling gleeful and thinking up new dishes to make.

Southerners disliked the unique flavor of the kiba meat, and many of them disliked the texture of the hamburger steak too. But the reason was different from Donda Wu - they didn't hate the 「soft meat」, they just preferred heavier seasoning.

After analyzing the information I got on hand, I decided to settle the match with 『Braised kiba』.

「... Alright then, the meat will need to be cooked for a while, correct? I will use this time to take care of my own work.」

And with that, Naudiz left the kitchen.

After grinding the aria, I checked the boiling pot that Vena Wu was tending to.

All the meat was beneath the lilo, and the fire was maintained at medium strength. She even had scooped up the foam.

I sighed in relief and stood beside Vena Wu.

「Thank you. I'm already done with the braising sauce, let me switch with you... Vena Wu, I'm really sorry about yesterday.」

I already apologized plenty of times since this morning.

But Vena Wu remained silent and refused to meet my eyes.

「I really didn't mean it. The sudden appearance of Kaslan Lutim and Yamiel Lei just attracted my attention.」

「...」

「I admit that I am a careless retard, I will never ignore you again, believe me. I'm sorry, I am already reflecting for making you so unhappy.」

Vena Wu narrowed her eyes unhappily, her eyes finally looked my way.

「... Are you really reflecting on your actions...?」

「Yes! Of course, I am!」

「... Never mind, it's hard for you to work when I'm showing such an attitude when I'm assisting you...」

「No, you did your work properly, so there's no need to worry about my feelings... Leaving work aside, seeing you so angry fills me with guilt. I will be careful in the future, can you forgive me?」

「... I can't forgive you so easily... If you let me slap you, I might cool down a little...」

「If it can help you vent, then hit me!」

Vena Wu stood before the boiling pot and puffed her thicc breasts toward me.

「Don't say that so lightly... It might not be much against a man from Forest's Edge, but a foreigner like you might get your teeth knocked out from my slap...」

「S-Since you can only cool down after hitting me so hard, that means my actions were very foolish, correct? I will accept this punishment willingly.」

「... Why...? You think nothing of me, correct...? You don't intend to marry me, so why are you going so far...?」

「That's not true. Even though we don't have such feelings for each other, I still cherish you. It's exactly because I don't have any ulterior motives for you, that's why I know how much you mean to me.」

Vena Wu frowned and put more strength into her glare.

「You mean you can't feel any feminine charm from me, huh... I understand... You irked me even more with those words, so I will beat you up...」

She put her soft fingertips and palm on my cheek.

She might not be as powerful as a man, but she was still a strong denizen of the Forest's Edge. Her ability to carry heavy equipment daily was proof of her strength. Therefore, the destructive power of her slap was probably equivalent to a man stronger than I was. I had to prepare myself.

I couldn't fall towards the pots. After checking with a glance, I gritted my teeth.

Vena Wu raised her right arm high and fast...

And then hugged me.

「Is that what you are trying to pull!?!」

「Ara... Your reaction is just as I imagined... How boring...」

She said softly and tightened her arms, hugging me tightly. It was like the Madarama snake had shown up again.

If Vena Wu will forgive me, then this was fine... But three seconds later, my resolve disappeared.

「V-Vena Wu, you are not angry anymore, right...?」

「It's still early... The price has to be worth at least one tooth...」

A difficult-to-describe sensation was pressing onto my body with amazing strength.

If this carried on for a few more seconds, a certain nerve of mine would snap... As I was thinking about that in a daze, Vena Wu's tender and strong body left me.

「I will let you off for now... My heart is still filled with wounds...」

Vena Wu muttered softly as she picked up a firewood and tossed it into the stove.

I pushed my weak body and checked the pot's condition. A lot of the water had evaporated, and it was time to add more.

As I was scooping water from the flask, Vena Wu called out to me with a melancholic voice:

「Asuta... I wasn't hurt because you didn't notice me...」

「Ehh?」

「When you looked at that woman, your eyes were so gentle. That was what hurt me... She wanted to harm you, and yet you looked at her with such gentle eyes... This meant there aren't any special feelings when you look at me...」

After that, the face Vena Wu showed completely surprised me.

Her face was filled with sorrow and innocence, like a child abandoned by her parents— so weak and frail.

I was ready for her to scream and cry, but she held back her tears and sighed deeply as if she wanted to exhale all her sorrow.

「I'm sorry... When I first approached you, I just wanted to fulfill my own dream... I don't have the right to blame you... I know that... But you are so kind to me... so... I can't help bearing expectations...」

「... Should I draw a clear line with you?」

When she heard my retarded reply, she looked at me with fear-inducing eyes.

「Don't ever say that again... my heart is like an overcooked aria, all gooey...」

「S-Sorry.」

「Don't apologize if you don't know what you did wrong... And don't you ever leave me...」

Vena Wu lowered her head and bit on her thumbnails like a kid.

「Since you aren't sure how to treat me, then just stay by my side... I will deal with it myself... Don't be overly concerned or stop me...」

「... I see.」

「... Hmm... Maybe it will start feeling good when you hurt me...」

「I-It's better for you to not venture into that realm!」

「What's the problem... Everyone has a different view on happiness, you know...?」

Finally, Vena Wu smiled and bowed quietly to me.

「Well then, I want to apologize to you for today... Sorry for letting my emotions get in the way while I'm working... I will reflect on this, will you forgive me...?」

「There's nothing to forgive, it is my fault in the first place.」

「If you forgive me, I will accept any humiliation play...」

「I forgive you!」

This little drama between us ended. Some tens of minutes later, Naudiz returned.

「Is it time yet?」

「Yes, it's about time.」

I pulled some of the lilo away and poked the meat with Krilee chopsticks. It glided into the meat without much resistance. It was cooked just right.

「Alright, I'm scooping the meat up, move the pot away.」

I scooped up all the lilo and meat onto the plate, then heaved up the pot together with Vena Wu. We couldn't put the pot on the floor, so we placed it into a similar-sized pot filled with water. The heated pot sizzled loudly, and a large amount of water vaporized right away. We then filled the pot beneath it with water. After repeating three times, we left the pot in the water.

During this time, the meat had cooled down. We used water to clean the meat and remove the fats from it.

The meat was very tender, and we had to be careful not to mess up its appearance when we cleaned it. We then wiped away any moisture with a clean piece of cloth. We had to remove the fats completely.

I then cut the meat into squares about 5 cm long. This process required a lot of care in order to preserve the meat's appearance.

Next, we had to take care of the pot. After cooling and leaving it aside, all the fats appeared on the surface of the pot. The cooling was done with a normal-temperature water, but there were still a lot of solid fats in the pot. We collected all the fats and placed them into a pouch that I brought. Even though they won't be used in today's dish, these fats were still a valuable ingredient.

I placed the cut kiba together with the whole aria that had its ends chopped off into the pot. There were 10 kg of meat and 40 arias, which quickly filled up two large pots.

I added three-fifths of a bottle of Tau sauce, four bottles of fruit wine and twenty grounded arias into the soup stock that had been cleared of the fats. After stirring carefully, I split the braising sauce between the two pots evenly.



After that, we just had to cook it over a small flame.

「Yes, we should make it in time.」

In the two-and-a-half hours we were given, we used an hour to stew the meat, and the final simmering process would require 30 to 40 minutes. It was a little rushed after all.

Cleaning the meat midway was very tedious. I could shorten the time if I washed several pieces of meat at the same time, but I insisted on striving for quality.

「Hmm, it smells really nice.」

Naudiz twitched his large nose.

The fragrances of the Tau sauce and fruit wine filled the kitchen. Unlike myam, this was a sweet smell. I couldn't help thinking of home.

But I wasn't allowed to be in a daze. I couldn't use lilo or add additional water and had to keep pouring the braising sauce if the meat surfaced.

And when only a third of the braising sauce was left, I had to keep soaking the meat nonstop. After simmering for 40 minutes it was finally done.

「Alright, I will put out the fire. Please reheat before serving it to the customers.」

It sounded like common sense, but this was a necessary step. After the braised food had cooled down, reheating it would enhance the flavor.

If there were refrigerators in this world, I would want to prepare the braised meat one day earlier and leave it overnight. But there was nothing I could do about fridges, so I could only keep it cool at room temperature. There were more than 4 hours before sunset, so it would still taste better than being freshly cooked.

「Thank you for your hard work, this is the agreed payment.」

Naudiz handed a small pouch to me.

I checked, and there were 8 eight white copper plates in it.

「Thank you. I hope you can sell all of it, I'm not sure if that will happen though.」

「I don't know either, there is the issue of price too. If sales are bad, I will adjust the price to match Karon dishes, so one dish would cost 4 red copper plates.」

Naudiz answered as he hurried over with a plate.

「Huh? Do you want to try it? You can only know its real taste after it has cooled down.」

「Yes, I want to compare the difference... Actually, I just want to try it as soon as possible since the dish is finally done.」

The food belonged to Naudiz, so he could do whatever he wanted. He scooped up a meat cube, and the corners of his eyes drooped about 2 mm.

The meat wobbled on the spoon. It was so tender that spoons and chopsticks could break it apart easily. The lean meat looked translucent and had a rubbery texture.

The taste of the Tau sauce and fruit wine had completely seeped into the meat. The taste of the meat mixed together with the heavy seasoning... just thinking about this made me hungry.

「I'm digging in.」

Naudiz put the 『Braised kiba』 into his mouth.

The layers of meat and fats were melting away in his mouth, and the enticing taste was spreading.

Naudiz after chewing for a long time swallowed as if it was a pity to do so. He turned to me with a dazed smile:

「This is really... really delicious. If I can't sell this, then the problem lies with my business skills. Asuta, thank you for making this splendid dish.」

## Part 3

Our work ended without any incident.

Nothing of note happened while I was away, and I went home on time after all the food was sold out.

After returning to the Fa house, I didn't forget to bid farewell to Vena Wu. I started preparing the food for tomorrow's business and dinner.

Rii Sudora was the only one here as I taught her to cook.

「Well then, let's start preparing the ingredients. The women from the other houses will be here soon, please use the stove first.」

「Thank you... Excuse me, is it really fine for me to use your pot?」

「Yes. It's a pain to make a trip back home to get it, right? It's fine.」

Ai Fa wasn't home right now. According to the schedule, she would be heading to the Latzu or Gazu village that were some distance away from the Fa house and teach them bloodletting and butchery.

「So in the end, how many houses asked the Fa house to teach them?」

「Only a few houses near us requested for our help. However, eleven houses are in favor of us committing to this work.」

That didn't include the tribal chief clans and their kins.

There were 37 houses in Forest's Edge, and only 17 of them were not related to the tribal chief clans... Which meant more than half the denizens of Forest's Edge belonged to the Wu clan, Sauti clan, Zaza house, and their kins.

Of these 17 houses, 11 of them agreed with us. Considering the fact that the Wu clan and a hundred kins concurred with our actions, that meant about half of the denizens in Forest's Edge supported the Fa house.

The neutral Sauti clan was also on friendly terms with us. We could only work hard and show the results in order to win the approval of the Zaza house.

「Incredible. The Fa house is bringing a beacon of light to the houses on the verge of withering.」

Rii Sudora stared at me with her clear eyes.

「Of all the minor houses, the Sudora house is the closest to ruin. It's embarrassing to say this, but if not for the copper plates I earned today, the vegetables in our food store would be depleted... To avoid this, the men in our house are also hunting for kiba in the forest today.」

「Oh, I see. I'm happy to be of help to the Sudora house.」

There was a knocking on the door when I was answering.

「Which house is it?」

「... We are women from the Dean house, there are two of us.」

This was the first time I heard of that house.

Even though I was good at remembering names, my memory capacity was almost at its limit. Were there a Dean house around here? I tilted my head in doubt and walked to the door.

At this moment, Rii Sudora grabbed my hand.

「Asuta, the Dean house is a kin of the Tsun clan... and are now the kin of the Zaza house.」

Kins of the Zaza house, huh.

In that case, they had to obey the opinion of the Zaza house and oppose us from doing business in the Post Station Town.

Besides, the Fa house was the reason why the Tsun clan had fallen. What kind of emotions did they bore towards us? I didn't have the chance to find out. I looked at the incredibly guarded look in Rii Sudora's calm face and nodded. I stood before the door.

「May I ask for the reason for your visit? I don't recall the Fa house being acquainted with the Dean house.」

「We are here to participate in the cooking lesson. Could you let us join in?」

「You are here to learn to cook? Did the Zaza house agree to this?」

「Yes. They didn't stop us from coming here to learn cooking.」

I see, they didn't intend to help the stall in the Post Station Town or prepare kiba meat, but they were interested in the delicious meal. I definitely welcomed their visit and had no reason to turn them away.

I carefully removed the stick barring the door and opened the door a little.

Like what they said, two women were standing outside. One was an elderly and married lady, the other was a girl around ten years of age.

Beside their feet were pots filled with poitan. After confirming that there was no one else, I opened the door completely.

「Thank you for accepting our sudden visit. I'm the elder sister of the Dean house head, Jass Dean, this is my family member, Tulu Dean.」

「... Tulu Dean?」

I focused on the girl.

Her medium-length brown hair was tied to both sides of her neck, and she had a meek expression. Her large puppy-like eyes seemed to be flickering with doubt as she looked at us.

「Ahh, you are that child from the Tsun clan branch house! So you have left the Tsun clan village and are now a part of the Dean house.」

「That's right. This child's mother was the younger sister of me and the house head. Our sister has passed on, so she and her father are now members of the Dean house.」

The elderly lady Jass Dean answered.

Her attitude was calm and respectful, and her sharp eyes were filled with strength and determination.

「I see. That's great, you look lively. I'm sorry for recognizing so late, even though the house head conference was just three days ago.」

Upon hearing my words, Tulu Dean became dumbstruck.

Her large eyes started tearing up.

「W-What happened? Did I say something wrong?」

Tulu Dean shook her head hard, and large tears fell to the ground.

「Asuta of the Fa house. This blood is a kin of the Tsun clan that attempted to harm you. She had broken off ties with the Tsun clan and chose to live on as a member of the Dean house. Will you forgive her past crimes?」

「Crime? She didn't do anything to me though?」

「But she is still the kin of the Tsun clan who committed grave sins. The Fa house has more reasons to loathe the Tsun clan than any other people.」

This felt like the conversation I had with Lau Lei and the others yesterday.

Seeing how serious Jass Dean looked, I tried to answer:

「No, the new tribal chiefs decided not to pursue the crimes of the branch houses, and all the house heads agreed to this. Therefore, I don't hate the Tsun clan branch house in the first place. And of course, I have no reason to turn away Tulu Dean.」

「... I see.」

「Yes, and I also spent some time with Tulu Dean. Amongst the people who had lost their will and energy, she was the one who worked the hardest.」

After hearing my words, Tulu Dean turned tearful again.

Her expression still had a hint of cold maturity, but her eyes had regained their luster. That alone made me really happy.

「I cooked meat and grilled poitan with her before, so she is actually everyone's senior. Tulu Dean, you need to learn properly, then teach the Dean house women back home.」

「... Thank you...」

The girl slumped her head weakly, and Jass Dean patted her head.

Her eyes were stern, but I could feel the love she had for the orphaned child of her sister.

「Alright then, let's begin. Oh, this is Rii Sudora from the Sudora house. The women from the Fou house and Von house will be coming later too.」

I couldn't help chatting with them for a little more, but since I didn't come back early, I wouldn't have enough time if I didn't start preparing now. I ushered the two members of the Dean house into the house and started my own work.

「Please revise the poitan grilling method first. I will be working here, just holler if there is anything you don't understand.」

「Yes.」

The two of them picked up the pot and walked past me.

「Ah!」

I yelled when I saw the side of Tulu Dean's face.

Tulu Dean jumped in surprise, then turn towards me.

「Ah, sorry about that, I just realized that there isn't any scar where you were scalded earlier... That's great.」

I smiled to cheer the gloomy girl up.

At this point, Tulu Dean smiled clumsily in return.

「Thank you very much for back then. I'm very happy for the gentle gesture you and that red-haired girl from the Wu clan showed me.」

「It's nothing, I only splashed water at you in a panic. I will relay that to Lala Wu for you.」

Be it the people left in the Tsun clan village or the kins who took them in, a new life awaited them.

It had only been three days since the house head conference, but I thought Donda Wu's judgment was right. Even though the crimes of the Tsun clan main house members like Diga and Doddo were still unclear, the Tsun clan branch houses were only guilty of stealing from the forest, so they didn't need to be punished for any other crimes.

Did the people in the Genos castle understand this situation... Did they even want to understand? We had to take note of that.

I started dicing the aria laid out on the board as I thought about that.

「... Later, Kaslan Lutim and Dali Sauti came to find me and told me the result of their discussion with Kamyua.」

After having dinner, I prepared the ingredients for the next day as I explained to Ai Fa.

「The caravan will enter the Forest's Edge using the route the Wu clan usually takes to enter the Post Station Town and head to the south. After passing through the Sauti village, they will enter the forest. They will traverse the forest in half a day and enter the rocky area. It will take a few days before they can reach the highway. However, the rocky area doesn't have any kiba and isn't part of the Forest's Edge. Hence, the Sauti clan will only guide them through the forest on the first day.」

「Yes.」

「But even if the caravan sets off first thing in the morning, it would be dusk by the time they traverse the forest. It will be too dangerous for the guides to enter the forest at night and return to their village, so they will need to spend the night with the caravan in the rocky area. Dali Sauti was unhappy about that. He complained angrily: 『The Tsun clan people actually took on such a troublesome job.』 」

「Yes.」

「The Tsun clan seemed to be planning to dump this job to Tay Tsun... no, Tay. They will need to venture deep into the forest and avoid kiba for half a day. Dali Sauti complained that they will need to send at least four men as guides. But the caravan members alone numbered more than 20, so the kiba probably won't attack such a large group.」

「Yes.」

「... Ai Fa, if you are tired and don't want to talk, just tell me honestly.」

「What are you talking about? I'm fine.」

Ai Fa laid on the floor lazily as she answered and looked more lethargic than yesterday.

Lying prone on the floor, her untied hair fell over her face, so I couldn't see her face. I poured the diced myam, aria, and fruit wine into a leather pouch, then sighed softly.

「And so, their meeting with Kamyua Yost ended smoothly. I'm curious about what they think of Kamyua Yost, but Kaslan Lutim only commented: 『He is an unfathomable person.』 while Dali Sauti said: 『As expected, I hate people from Rock City.』 」

「Yes.」

「And so, the job two days later will be handled by the Sauti clan, and they reached a conclusion smoothly. The three tribal chiefs had returned to their own villages for now, and will relay the demands of the Genos castle to the house heads of their kins and will collate their views. They have left six men behind to keep watch over the Tsun clan village. And that's how things ended.」

「Yes.」

「... That concludes my report. Thank you for listening.」

「It's fine, I wasn't really listening to the things that could give me a headache.」

Ai Fa rested one side of her cheeks on the rug, and said weakly:

「The tribal chiefs have their own worries too. I'm overwhelmed with my own work alone.」

「Erm~, did you go to the Latzu house today?」

「Yeah. The kins of the Latzu and the men from the Gazu also came... I'm more exhausted than yesterday.」

「Well, they all welcomed you happily, correct?」

「I don't feel happy even if they did.」

Ai Fa sounded peeved. I couldn't see her expression from this angle, but she was probably pouting.

「Also, a man from the Latzu house suddenly proposed to me.」

「W-What?」

「Another man from the Gazu house also proposed marriage to me. And before I knew it, they were wrestling on the ground and making a big scene. The enraged head of the Latzu house broke them up, but the bond between the two houses almost fractured.」

「T-That must be hard on you... But did they give up on the proposal?」

「... They said that if I got injured again and couldn't hunt anymore, they hoped I would reconsider. I wanted to yell at them: 『Are you hoping that I will get injured terribly?』 ... Anyway, it was an irritating day.」

I was finally freed from the preparation work and rushed in a panic to Ai Fa's side without even washing my hands.

「Are they fierce like Darum Wu? Will they pester you in the future?」

「How would I know, go ask them yourself.」

「No, but—」

「Shut up. Since you are done with your work, give me your hand.」

「Ehh? Hand?」

I was confused, but I still placed my palm on Ai Fa's temple like last night.

「Hmm.」



Ai Fa moaned with satisfaction. Seemed like I was right. This felt like caressing the neck of a kitten that was throwing a tantrum.

「Just talking to a large group tires me out. It's amazing how you can keep working in the Post Station Town... No, not just you, the women from the Wu clan can do it too. It's my heart that is too frail.」

「No, Ai Fa, don't be so humble, that's not like you at all. Everyone has things they are suited for or not. Like what I said last night, you will get used to it if you spend some time doing so.」

It seemed that Ai Fa didn't agree with my words, and she sighed uncharacteristically.

「... I want to do my duty as a hunter soon.」

She looked a little pitiful, so I patted her head gently.

The last time I did that, Ai Fa punched my stomach. I was a little worried, but she just closed her eyes happily tonight and didn't shy away from my hand.

「Anyway, I just need to bear with it for a few more days. When my arm is completely healed, I can return to the forest. The time we spend with the other houses will go down naturally.」

「What a negative way of putting it. I'm tired today too, so let's turn in early.」

「Yes.」

「Alright, let's sleep.」

I stood up and extinguished the candle. I then lay down a short distance away.

I didn't expect Ai Fa to approach me.

「Asuta, why are you sleeping so far away?」

「Eh? No, this is the usual distance, right?」

「... My head still hurts.」

As I was lying on the ground, she grabbed my left wrist and pulled it to her temple. My elbow was twisted to the limit and I screamed:

「That hurts! Wait! This is beyond the limit of a human bone joint!」

「In that case, you can just adjust your sleeping posture.」

As my hand was on her temple, the only way to meet her demand was to move closer and face her way during sleep.

The room was dim and we couldn't see each other, so I thought it wouldn't be a problem. After actually changing my sleeping position, I realized a big problem. We were very close to each other.

「House head, listen...」

「Shut up, I'm getting drowsy.」

She placed my palm on her cheek and covered it with her own hand before closing her eyes.

The only light in the room was the bright moonlight from the window, but I could still see her beautiful face clearly and the curve of her body lying sideways.

*... Just like an endearing cat.*

I believed that Ai Fa didn't have any ulterior intention, yet, her body contact with me was increasing every day.

She was treating me as a family she didn't need to hold back with. That filled me with joy... but what should I do about her making my heart flutter?

*... After seeing such an honest, beautiful and charming girl, of course those men will want to marry her.*

Ai Fa fell asleep quickly and started breathing steadily. I stared at her sleeping face and thought to myself:

*Speaking of which, denizens in Forest's Edge could marry at fifteen. Ai Fa got into a feud with the Tsun clan at that age. If not for that, the people around her would have proposed to her already.*

I started feeling uneasy.

A person of dubious origins shouldn't marry in this world. Even though I told myself that, what should I do if a man wins over Ai Fa's heart in the future?

I had thought about this numerous times, but I always pushed it aside.

*I want to keep our relationship like this, is that impossible...?*

I swallowed my sigh and closed my eyes.

My senses became keener, and I could feel the warmth and the nice scent from Ai Fa clearly.

Ai Fa had not used the fruit that attracted kiba for a long time now. The only scent on her were those of herbs and meat, which wasn't much different from the other women... However, Ai Fa was still Ai Fa. I only felt at ease because of her body warmth and scent. This was an indisputable fact.

As I was thinking about all this, sleepiness soon overwhelmed me.

I heard the infuriating matter about the Genos people from Kaslan Lutim, finished my work at the inn for the first time, taught the women to cook, and worried about the future of Forest's Edge... I was exhausted and was soon asleep.

And then...

「...?」

Some undetermined amount of time had passed.

When I came to, I felt a soft sensation covering my mouth.

I opened my eyes half-awake and saw blue cat-like eyes before me.

Ai Fa leaned in, pushing her face near my nose.

Before I realized it, she had shifted away my hand that was on her temple.

Ai Fa's hand that held my hand was now covering my mouth.

「Don't speak... Asuta, don't move.」

She whispered in a barely audible voice and continued leaning in closer.

I was shocked and wanted to get up, but she grabbed my shoulder with her other hand and pushed me down onto the bed.

「I told you not to move. Asuta, don't you understand me?」

She whispered again.

As I laid down, she pressed down on my upper body and covered my body from the side.

There was a stern light in her blue eyes as she stared right into my eyes. The spots on my body that were in contact with Ai Fa's palms, arm and breasts were blazing hot.

「Asuta, don't worry... Just do as I say.」

With these words... Ai Fa laid on top of me with her entire body.

## Part 4

My heart thumped in my chest.

Her scent and body warmth made it hard for me to think.

Ai Fa who was on top of me...

Climbed over my body and reached for the wall.



「Don't move... If you move, the air will be disturbed.」

Ai Fa said under her breath and returned to her original position.

However, her hand was still covering my mouth.

And— her other hand was holding the saber that was leaning against the wall.

「Up until just now, someone was peeking in through the window. Now they are near the backyard of the house.」

I understood.

I felt drained for my retarded imagination, as if all my bones had been pulled out.

But now wasn't the time to relax. A few days ago, we almost died when we were attacked while we were sleeping.

Who were the assailants this time? What were their motives? I couldn't feel anyone's presence at all.

「They are behind the room to the left. There is a window there... Two years ago, the eldest son of the Tsun clan broke through its wooden grates and barged in.」

That was an ominous coincidence.

However, Diga, Doddo, and Tay should have been sent to the Dom house at the northernmost edge of Forest's Edge. And since everyone thought their behavior was terrible and might be dangerous, their movements should be restrained, instead of being as free as Mida's.

「I will take a look outside. You stay in the house. After I go out, bar the door quietly.」

I shook my head slowly. I didn't say anything and quietly held Ai Fa's hand.

Ai Fa's eyes wavered a little anxiously.

「If they use that weird herb or commit arson, we will be in danger. Don't worry; at most, there are just two of them. I won't lose so easily.」

「...」

I stared at Ai Fa with my thoughts shown clearly in my eyes.

She smiled awkwardly this time.

「If they are more powerful than me, I will draw them to the Lante river and push them into it. No matter what, I can't move freely if you are with me, so just stay here and pray for me.」

「...」

「It's fine, I promise that I won't die so easily.」

After saying that, Ai Fa removed her hand from my mouth.

Her freed fingers groped the space between her neck and her chest.

「Your wish will definitely beat off any calamity.」

The blue stone I gifted her should be dangling around there.

I still got up slowly while holding Ai Fa's hand.

「... Let's go. Don't make any sound.」

Finally, a brave smile appeared on Ai Fa's face, and she got up slowly. Her moves didn't disrupt the air at all. But I wasn't a hunter, and all I could do was move my body slowly and avoid creaking the floor.

Ai Fa headed for the entrance with fluid strides like a wild beast. She took out the door bar, handed it to me, then leaned in close:

「Bar the door after I close it. Don't step outside unless I call for you.」

She then opened the door carefully, swept her gaze across the darkness, then left swiftly. I felt troubled after barring the door.

*What's going on?*

The threat of the Tsun clan was gone, so why were unexpected guests visiting the Fa house? Were they the men from the Latzu house and Gazu house who proposed to Ai Fa?

No matter who they were, they were probably up to no good since they were peeking into someone else's house in the middle of the night. After barring the door, I slowly groped my way to the stove.

The Santoku knife, kitchen knife, and utility knife were laid out on a board. I grabbed the sturdy knife left behind by Ai Fa's late father and secured it to my waist.

*It's fine... No matter who they are, Ai Fa won't lose.*

「Uwah!」

As I was thinking about that, a man's cry came from the backyard of the house.

I then heard a dull thud of something bumping into the wall and a moan like an animal being strangled.

And finally, silence.

I made up my mind, lit a candle stand with a Rana grass, and then headed to the door at the back of the house.

I opened the door on the left. This was the storeroom filled with things that weren't used often in daily lives, such as wood being dried, lumber and saw. After opening the door, I entered the storeroom quietly.

The window was located on the wall opposite to the door. I walked over and shone the light at the window. Ai Fa's face was unexpectedly close to the window, and her eyes were burning with the fire of a hunter.

「Asuta, you still came in the end... Never mind, give me the candle stand.」

I followed Ai Fa's instructions and passed her the candle stand between the window grates. Ai Fa was looking at a dark corner and used her free hand to take the candle stand.

「Asuta, you definitely can't come out. There might be others besides these retards.」

「A-Alright. But are you okay? And who are the retards...?」

I clung onto the grates and tried to follow Ai Fa's gaze.

Someone was squatting in the darkness.

It was a man with a strong build. He wasn't wearing a fur cape, instead, his attire consisted of swirly patterned clothes. He was a man from Forest's Edge.

「Shameless retards, I never imagined you would act so foolishly and trample over your only path towards redemption.」

「No! It's not like this! We are not trying to hurt you!」

I heard the hysterical voice of a young man.

His voice was more hoarse than I remembered and sounded weak even though he was shouting with all his might. He was like a shadow of his former self... However, I won't mistake his voice.

「You... What are you doing here!?」

Before I realized it, my voice was filled with rage. The man who was squatting with his back bent over in the darkness shuddered and said in a sorrowful voice again:

「B-Believe me! I didn't escape here to hurt you... W-We are here to save you— for the sake of saving ourselves too!」

The man raised his head while kneeling and approached Ai Fa. Ai Fa pointed her saber at his nose, and he screamed and fell over backward.

The pale moonlight shone over the man's frail face which was covered in tears and mud. He was definitely the former eldest son of the Tsun clan main house.

「How retarded... You are beyond redemption. Since you can't do your duty as hunters, face your death in the forest.」

「That's not it! You are mistaken! We didn't run away from the Dom house... No, we did escape from there, but it's not what you think! Please, save us!」

「I don't understand what you mean. Asuta, there is a bundle of Fuibaha vines in that room, give it to me. I want to tie up his limbs and hand him over to the Dom house.」

「Wait! If you hand me over to the Dom house like this, they will really scalp us!」

He screamed in fear. He looked around in the darkness, as if he was on the verge of losing his mind.

「I-I understand! Just tie me up! I won't resist! I promise! I won't escape from the Dom house again! But before that, please listen to our explanations... And let me into your house quick! A-Ai Fa, if that man chases after us, you might get killed too!」

「Who is that man? You are the only ones in Forest's Edge who will make an attempt on my life.」

「T-That's not it! The Fa house caused the Tsun clan's ruin, so he must hate you to the very bones! If you don't want to die, let me into your house! That man is a monster... You can't defeat him!」

「Who exactly is that man? Your words are illogical.」

Diga, the former eldest son of the Tsun clan main house showed an expression that was somewhere between crying and laughing... He then said with a trembling voice:

「Zattsu Tsun... The former clan head Zattsu Tsun! We escaped from him! Please! Let us in before he finds us!」

In the end, we still let these uninvited guests into the house.

There were two guests, Diga and Doddo. I couldn't see Doddo from my position earlier since Ai Fa had subdued him with her saber and was stepping on his back.

The two uninvited guests sat on the floor sullenly. And of course, their arms were tied behind their backs, and their legs were tied up too, allowing them to take strides of roughly 30 cm, making it impossible to run.



And they were completely unarmed. They had neither blades nor hunter's cape. They escaped from the Dom house empty-handed.

「Zattsu Tsun has been taken prisoner by the Jean house. Why do you want us to help you?」

Ai Fa sat in the seat of honor with one knee propped up. She glared at Diga and Doddo with sharp eyes.

「Z-Zattsu Tsun brought us out from the Dom house. He set fire to the Dom village and broke us out in the chaos... We escaped from the Dom house together with Tay...」

「So you wanted to escape after all.」

「W-We had no choice!? Zattsu Tsun threatened to kill us right there if we didn't go with him! We would be dead if we resisted! That's the kind of man Zattsu Tsun is...」

He was talking about his grandfather.

Leaving Tay from the branch house aside, it felt really weird to hear Diga address his close relative as Zattsu Tsun.

「Isn't Zattsu Tsun deathly ill? He is all skin and bones, like dried-up food. People even worried that he wouldn't be able to withstand the trip to the Jean house.」

「In recent years, he was too frail to even walk... He probably rejuvenated after hearing that the Tsun clan was in ruins... He is all skin and bones, but those eyes... they looked just like his eyes before he fell ill. He was on the verge of death, but he regained his strength...」

Diga quivered as he said that.

Doddo hung his head low in silence beside him.

Both of them looked pale and skinny and were covered in mud and leaves. There were no signs of their past arrogance at all. Did they lose all their energy in just three days? Or was it Zattsu Tsun who spooked them so hard? It was probably both.

「Zattsu Tsun said that he wants to claim back the Tsun clan's ruling authority. He wants to betray all the fools who betrayed the Tsun clan, regain the title of Forest's Edge's tribal chief, and make the Tsun clan great again...」

Doddo added.

He sounded depressed.

Did his voice change? Compared to his frail appearance, his weak voice was completely different from the past.

「T-That's right! I thought he would rescue the other family members and leave Forest's Edge together... B-But I never imagined that he would do something so retarded...」

「If you think his actions are retarded, just tell him on the spot.」

「W-We attempted to persuade him with all sorts of reasons! The Wu clan is still in the Tsun clan village, and all the kins of the Tsun clan are now working together with the Wu clan. We can't defy the Wu clan anymore.」

「And then... he laughed after hearing that.」

Doddo's voice was shivering weakly. He used to glare at us like a wild dog with his dark blue eyes, but they were filled with pleas now.

「He showed a demonic smile and said... that he can seize back the proper order in the Forest's Edge with just the four of us... and he can rescue the clan head Zuro after getting back in power...」

「S-So we escaped while he was sleeping!」

「... The illness must have gotten into Zattsu Tsun's brain. You can't do anything with just four people, right?」

「I-I think so too. The only method I can think of is to attack the head of the Wu clan or you two.」

Diga switched his gaze between the two of us meekly.

「I-If that man learns the reason for the Tsun clan's destruction, he will definitely treat the Fa house that exposed the Tsun clan as his greatest enemy. That's why we...」

「So you came here to warn us of the danger, right? Why didn't you just knock on the door then?」

「Y-You must hate us so much. I don't think you will open the door, so we looked for a way to sneak in...」

「Are you hoping to gain the trust of others after acting so covertly?」

Ai Fa sounded just a little sterner, and that made Diga yelp and ball himself up.

Diga's reaction was so funny that it was sad. The opposite was usually true, but that was the impression he gave us.

Ai Fa flicked her untied hair and looked at me unhappily.

「Asuta, what do you think?」

「Hmm? Well... I want to check something. What happened to Tay?」

「T-Tay decided to go along with Zattsu Tsun. So we ditched him...」

「Is that true?」

「I-It's true! Even when Zattsu Tsun was laughing like a madman, Tay just looked at him in a daze... He probably can't think for himself anymore...」

You people from the main house were the ones who pressured him to be like this. I was a little angry.

Furthermore, I still didn't find the chance to ask Tay about who saved Ai Fa on that night.

Was he the one who rescued Ai Fa during the night of the house head conference?

If it was him... why would he want to endanger Forest's Edge now?

Bearing this complicated emotions by myself, I continued:

「How did Zattsu Tsun escape from the Jean house? Only Zattsu Tsun and Zuro Tsun were treated like criminals, so there should be people keeping watch throughout the night.」

「I-I'm not sure... Z-Zattsu Tsun's face and clothes were covered in fresh blood, and he was holding a saber. One or two men wouldn't be a match for him...」

A thin bony man covered in the blood of the denizens of Forest's Edge, standing in front of a burning village... Just imagining that scene gave me the chills. Diga was completely pale now, and his teeth were chattering.

「D-During the night, our hands would be tied to a pillar. But when the house we were in caught fire, the women from the Dom house untied our bonds. We charged out of the house and found Zattsu Tsun standing before us...」

「... He pointed at us with his saber and asked if we want to die here or run away together. The entire village was on fire, which attracted the attention of the men, but a few women should have seen Zattsu Tsun...」

Doddo seemed to be slightly calmer than Diga.

I sighed heavily and then turned to Ai Fa:

「... Basically, they aren't lying. If they were trying to assault us, they would have brought Tay along.」

Diga and Doddo weren't armed and couldn't win against Ai Fa. However, if Tay appeared with a blade in hand, what would happen then? I didn't even dare imagine.

Ai Fa remained calm from the beginning till the end. Even if Zattsu Tsun followed Diga here, she might think that it would save her the trouble.

She was filled with confidence. However, I wouldn't want to see Ai Fa killing anyone.

Unaware of my feelings, Ai Fa glared at Diga.

「Well then, what are your plans? The most we can do is hand you over to the Dom house.」

「T-That's fine! But we didn't commit arson in the Dom village and only ran away because Zattsu Tsun threatened us. Can you help us to explain this the Dom house...?」

「I can't vouch for you. Unless the Dom house women overheard your conversation, they wouldn't know what actually happened.」

「How can that be! If nothing is done, the Dom house will really kill us!」

Ai Fa rested her elbow on her propped-up knee, then supported her cheek with her hand and sighed.

「Don't you have any pride? You two scolded us so harshly in the past, and you are still shameless enough to come crying to me? If I were you, I probably would have scalped myself.」

「A-Are you still angry about the past? I will apologize as much as you want! I was just mesmerized by you back then! I really wanted to take you as my wife! I didn't mean to harm you!」

「Oh? You threatened to push me off the cliff if I don't marry you.」

「I-I wouldn't dare murder a fellow denizen of Forest's Edge! I was just talking smack! Please believe me!」

Diga rubbed the rug with his forehead.

Ai Fa ruffled her hair again and then looked at Doddo with a stronger gaze.

「What about you? Former second son of the Tsun clan. You drew a blade against Asuta and the men of the Wu clan in the past, correct...? There is still a clear mark of your violence on Asuta's stomach.」

「I... I couldn't help it...」

「What do you mean that you couldn't help it?」

「Once I drink wine, I won't care about anything... I can't forgive anyone who pissed me off... I can't stand it...」

His voice was still gloomy. He resembled a skinny wild dog, and his eyes were glaring at me through his messy hair.

「E-Even if I say that, you probably won't believe me... I was so relieved when I learned that I didn't harm you while I was drunk... I-I'm not tough enough to commit murder nonchalantly...」

I felt a strong sense of dissonance when I heard that.

This could be a good chance for me to understand the true nature of these hopeless men.

「Diga, can you raise your head?」

Diga lifted his head slowly.

His face was plain and childish, despite his big body.

As for Doddo, instead of a wild dog, a depressed old dog would be more apt as a description. Since he had a small stature, he looked frail and weak without his violent nature. He didn't look like a denizen of Forest's Edge at all.

The escape of Zattsu Tsun was a grave matter. After all, the denizens of Forest's Edge intended only to make Zattsu Tsun and Zuro Tsun pay for their crimes. We already informed Genos castle about this. If we couldn't arrest Zattsu Tsun tonight, this would be a disgrace when negotiations with the Genos castle resumes in the future.

That was why the Dom and Jean house heads would never forgive Diga and Doddo. Donda Wu and Graff Zaza would think the same. I wanted to use this chance to understand the true nature of these two retards

「Diga, you mentioned that you would never kill a fellow denizen of Forest's Edge, correct? What about the residents in the Post Station Town?」

「The residents in town?」

Diga Tsun tilted his thick neck like a dull-witted bull.

「W-Why did you bring up the Post Station Town all of a sudden? I'm confused...」

「The denizens of Forest's Edge think of the Post Station Town as an enemy. So I think you can hurt them without any hesitation.」

I tried acting all casual.

Ai Fa narrowed her eyes in doubt. Fortunately, she held her peace.

「D-Don't you get along well with them...? In the first place, you came from the city...」

「You are right, but I wasn't born in Genos. To be honest, I hate those people in Genos who look down on the denizens of Forest's Edge. My customers are mostly southerners and easterners.」

「I see... I-I'm not sure. I don't go to town often...」

「Ehh? But why?」

「Because... They are scary...」

「What?」

I forgot about my act and said loudly.

I was probably too loud, which made Diga squirm his shoulders in surprise.

「B-Because we are from the Forest's Edge, so they are always glaring at us angrily, right? If I'm too careless, they might drag me to a corner and beat me up... So I hadn't entered the town in a few years....」

His testimony left me speechless.

I tried to calm myself down and then looked towards Doddo:

「What about you? When I first met you in the Post Station Town, you drew your blade against a resident of the Post Station Town, correct?」

「... I hate the residents there. I think they are all enemies of Forest's Edge.」

「Yes, so you abducted women, assaulted travelers, and stole their crops?」

「Huh?」

Doddo opened his small eyes wide.

Speaking of which, his face was very similar to a lion-dog<sup>2</sup>, broad and cold. But he was Diga's younger brother, that meant he was around my age. A bewildered look with eyes wide open befitted his age.

「I'm not interested in the town's women. Anyway, how do I even steal the crops? The guards won't ignore it if I did that.」

「Some of the villages don't have guards though.」

「I don't know where these villages are... The forest has plenty of food for us to eat, so I don't need to go out of my way and steal food from them.」

「Hmm~, but the residents of the Post Station Town all said that the denizens of Forest's Edge kept committing misdeeds.」

「That's a long time ago before the Tsun clan stole from the forest. We were still young back then.」

「Yes, we were still eating aria and poitan too.」

Diga answered casually.

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2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Komainu>

I understood... I fell into deep thought. Uncle Dora didn't tell me in which era those things happened.

Besides, ten or so years weren't too distant past, it wouldn't be strange for rumors of Forest's Edge denizens stealing crops being passed down from then. Uncle Dora must have suffered too when he was young.

I didn't need to think too hard about this. I just had to ask Uncle Dora to speculate the time when this happened.

「... Are you trying to find the criminal?」

Doddo looked at me with gloomy eyes.

「It's Zattsu Tsun. Father Zuro is worried about the relations between the Tsun clan and Genos breaking down, while Diga and I hate the city. Only Zattsu Tsun will dare do anything to the townsmen.」

「Hmmp, are you trying to push all the blame to the former clan head?」

Ai Fa said coldly, and Doddo's face turned stiff pathetically, but Diga nodded weakly.

「... You did expose our greatest sins. But we really have no reasons to abduct the women from the city or steal their food. It doesn't matter if you believe it or not... The landlord of Genos doesn't have the resolve to pass judgment against the denizens of the Forest's Edge anyway.」

He was wrong. A few hours ago, I advised Kaslan Lutim to not let those crimes go unanswered.

But Doddo and the others didn't know about that. They didn't try to save their own skin because they didn't know. Therefore, they were telling the truth.

「Enough about that, the Dom house...」

When Diga said that in a pitiable voice, someone rapped the door loudly.

Diga and Doddo looked as if they were petrified and stopped moving. Ai Fa grabbed the saber beside her.

「Head of the Fa house, if you are still alive, wake up. We are from the Dom house.」

The hoarse roar made me go weak from fear, and Ai Fa sighed softly.

Diga and Doddo looked deathly pale.

「The Tsun clan men set fire in the Dom village and are now on the run! Head of the Fa house, are you still alive?」

「We are fine! I'm opening the door now!」

Ai Fa's voice was like an elastic whip. Despair clouded Diga and Doddo's eyes, and they looked up at Ai Fa who had stood up.

Ai Fa walked to the entrance with determined strides.

「Thank you for informing me about this urgent situation in the wee hours of the morning. You said that the men from the Tsun clan had escaped, who exactly are they?」

Ai Fa asked behind the closed door, and the other party's voice also calmed down.

「You are safe, huh. The Dom house can salvage a little of its reputation... The ones on the run are the three men from the Tsun clan taken in by the Dom house and the former clan head of the Tsun clan imprisoned by the Jean house. The Jean house man watching the former clan head got his throat bit open and his saber snatched away. After breaking out of the Jean house, the former clan head set the Dom village on fire and fled with the three Tsun clan men we had taken in!」

「... Hmmp, looks like you didn't lie.」

Ai Fa muttered softly and crossed her arms.

「You said something? Is your family member fine too? If you are both alright, then rest easy. The men of the Dom house will guard the Fa house. We will wipe away this disgrace with the blood of the Tsun clan traitors!」

A group of bulky men wearing kiba skulls on their heads had reached the Fa house.

Diga was shivering as if he had caught a cold. Doddo seemed to have given up and hung his head low.

Ai Fa glanced their way, then said:

「I appreciate your gesture. However, I have something to tell you. I have captured the eldest and second sons of the Tsun clan main house.」

「What!?!」

He roared in anguish again, and the door shook violently.

「Uwah...」

Diga groaned and lay prone on the floor.

「Is that true!? The traitors are in your house!? Head of the Fa house, open the door at once!」

「I will open it now. Don't break my door, men of the Dom house... But before that, I hope you can listen to my explanation. These two didn't come here to murder us. They did flee from the Dom village, but they only came here because they were too afraid of Zattsu Tsun.」

「What kind of joke is this! Open up right now! Hand them over to us!」



「Of course I will hand them over. But can you let the tribal chiefs investigate this carefully? Don't cut their throats right now. They claimed that the former clan head threatened them with a blade, that's why they fled. If they turn over a new leaf and return to the village voluntarily, do show some leniency in their punishment.」

「They tarnished the honor of the Dom house and trampled over our trust in them! Our only option is to chop off their heads! Enough talk, open the door!」

「If that is how the Dom house feels, I can't open the door. Call the three tribal chiefs here. If their words convince me, I will open the door.」

Ai Fa turned her face away and looked at us.

Before we knew it, Diga and Doddo were looking at Ai Fa with their heads tilted.

I was near the seat of honor, so I could only see the back of their heads. Ai Fa looked our way with her arms crossed, and her expression became more and more scary. She finally yelled:

「Why are you looking at me with such eyes! Stop looking at me like that!」

## Part 5

The next day, or rather, sometime before the dawn of the same day, Forest's Edge was on high alert. News of Zattsu Tsun's and Tay Tsun's escape spread from the northern villages to the entire Forest's Edge.

The escapees were vicious villains. One of them tore open the throat of a man with his teeth and set a village on fire. The denizens of Forest's Edge could no longer call him a fellow tribe mate. The tribal chiefs declared that Tay would be given back his family name of Tsun, and both him and Zattsu Tsun were to be captured dead or alive. Immediately after dawn, half the men entered the forest and the other half stayed behind to protect their homes.

It went without saying that the ones staying behind had to perform surveillance on top of protecting their homes. They needed to watch the people of the Tsun clan and those who used to be from the Tsun clan.

Zattsu Tsun might abduct them. The men from the branch houses who were free to move around were locked inside a house, thus restricting their movements.

Not just the men of the Tsun clan village, those who had been taken in by other kins were locked up too. As they didn't show any signs of resistance, their movements weren't restricted in the first place. However, nobody knew how they would act if Zattsu Tsun appeared before them again—the prison break of Diga's group made the other tribe mates wary.

Tulu Dean's father was also taken away. They were bestowed with a new family name after much hardship but were arrested and sent back to the Tsun clan village just when they were going along the right path. Just thinking about how the father and daughter might feel was breaking my heart.

The former members of the Tsun clan main house were also shifted to a place that was easy to keep watch over. Yamiel Lei, Aura, Zwei, and Mida were imprisoned by the Wu clan. Diga and Doddoo who almost lost their heads were taken as prisoners and sent to the Zaza house along with Zuro Tsun. The manpower was mostly concentrated in the Tsun clan, Wu clan, and Zaza house villages. As they guarded their family and kept watch on the prisoners, they prepared for Zattsu Tsun's attack.

As for the Fa house...

Escorted by the elites of Forest's Edge, we headed to the Post Station Town to run our business.

「... Hey, what's going on here?」

Milano Mast looked at us with sinister eyes.

This was only natural since we had twice our usual numbers, and the additional helpers were all hunters from Forest's Edge.

The four escorts guarding us were Ai Fa, Ludo Wu, Shin Wu, and Rau Lei.

To avoid spooking the Post Station Town residents, we chose hunters who were younger and had milder-looking faces. However, just being armed with a saber would give a very different impression to others. Milano Mast glared at Ludo Wu's group with a dangerous gleam close to hostility in his eyes.

「Sorry, we have our reasons...」

「Reasons? What reasons can there be? There's no need to do business while armed with a saber.」

「Genos castle should be notifying everyone shortly. Vicious criminals had fled from Forest's Edge, and we are not sure where they went.」

Milano Mast was stunned by my answer.

「Vicious criminals from Forest's Edge... you say?」

「That's right, two vicious criminals who violated grave taboos in the Forest's Edge had escaped. There was some bad blood between us, so these escorts will be joining me.」

To be frank, we shouldn't be setting up the stall during times like this.

But the Genos liaison ordered us to continue our stall operation. So we still came to the Post Station Town.

「People will find it suspicious for you to stop your business when a criminal appears in Forest's Edge. If you want to stop running your stall, then be prepared to be barred from doing business in the Post Station Town forever. Since you are not wanted criminals, just act as you usually do.」

That's what Pyschkurewuss, the representative of Marquis Genos said.

I could vaguely guess what he was thinking.

「Pyschkurewuss probably wants to apprehend Zattsu Tsun himself. Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun not only violated the rules of Forest's Edge, they also transgressed the law of Genos. They want to prosecute the two vicious criminals officially.」

Kaslan Lutim accompanied Donda Wu and the others to meet Pyschkurewuss back then, and he was now relaying his experience to me with a bitter face.

「The guards will protect the city, so the denizens of Forest's Edge can continue to set up stall without worry... If we can't do that, we can just stay in our settlement and forget about doing business in town... That's what Pyschkurewuss is saying.」

Simply put, he was trying to use us as bait.

If we refused, he would bar us from running a business in the Post Station Town.

*What exactly is Pyschkurewuss trying to do?*

As I was gritting my teeth internally, Milano Mast said in a daze:

「The vicious criminals from Forest's Edge... A denizen of Forest's Edge has become a criminal...」

「That's correct. Genos castle should be announcing their names and wanted posters before noon.」

It had been decades since Genos castle last prosecuted a denizen of Forest's Edge. In recent years, there were rumors that even if a denizen of Forest's Edge committed a crime, the people from the castle would cover it up. The death of Milano Mast's best friend also ended without any proper investigation.

What kind of emotions were going through Milano Mast's mind right now? He should be glad to see the people in the Genos castle prosecuting the denizens of Forest's Edge according to the law. But he should be frustrated that the death of his best friend was still ignored... If I was in his shoes, my conflicted feelings would send my heart into turmoil.

After a moment of silence, Milano Mast finally suppressed his emotions and swept his gaze across us.

「I understand the situation now... So the people in the Genos castle ordered you to continue doing your business?」

「Yes. We wanted to stop until the commotion is over, but...」

「Hmmp, you lot are fine baits. Just the sort of scheme the people in the castle would come up with.」

After saying that, Milano Mast turned and left.

Like usual, the two carts were at the back of the inn. We looked at each other.

「I thought he would react more strongly, but he accepted so simply. No matter how unhappy he is, he still can't go against the people of the Genos castle.」

Ludo Wu shrugged disappointedly. Speaking of which, Ludo Wu had met Milano Mast before.

I held back my sigh and announced:

「Alright then, let's go. We are running late, and the customers might be getting anxious.」

We set off for the stone paved road.

News of the vicious criminals had not been announced officially yet, but we were much more prominent than usual. Even though they were young and good-looking hunters, they still were hunters. Their eyes were more fearful and had less disdain. Such gazes stabbed at us from all over the place.

*Is it really fine to do this...?*

I couldn't shake away that thought.

We couldn't predict how the vicious criminal, Zattsu Tsun, would act.

No matter how anxious he was, there was no way he could restore power to the Tsun clan and take back the position of tribal chief clan again. In that case, he might attack his longtime enemy, the new tribal chief clan, the Wu clan. Or the kin house that abandoned the Tsun clan, the Zaza house. Or the Fa house that exposed the grave sins of the Tsun clan.

In the face of such serious threats, could we really enter the Post Station Town?

Wouldn't that endanger the residents of the Post Station Town?

Going by common sense, normal people wouldn't attack us inside the Post Station Town in broad daylight. Therefore, he would definitely strike during our commute from Forest's Edge to the Post Station Town.

However, not only did he hurt a fellow tribesmate, he also set a village on fire. I suspected he had lost his sense of reason. If we were safe and the residents in the Post Station Town got hurt from the collateral damage... Thinking about that made my mood very heavy.

Milano Mast, Uncle Dora, Tara, Shumimaru, Pops, Arudas, Yumi, and Naudiz— they were the people I got acquainted with in the Post Station Town. I wouldn't want anything to happen to them. I never imagined that I would ever conduct business with such a heavy heart.

「Ah!」

At this moment, someone called out loudly. Tara was sitting beside her father as usual. Her eyes were wide open as she yelped.

「Hi, Tara, Uncle... I want to buy vegetables today too.」

「Same as yesterday? That will be eight red copper plates.」

It was the first time they saw hunters accompanying us, so he looked a little pale. But he still wore a smile on his face.

Tara didn't look too scared either. The young girl just looked at Ludo Wu tensely.

「... Ah, little brat. We met quite some time ago. You are still so small.」

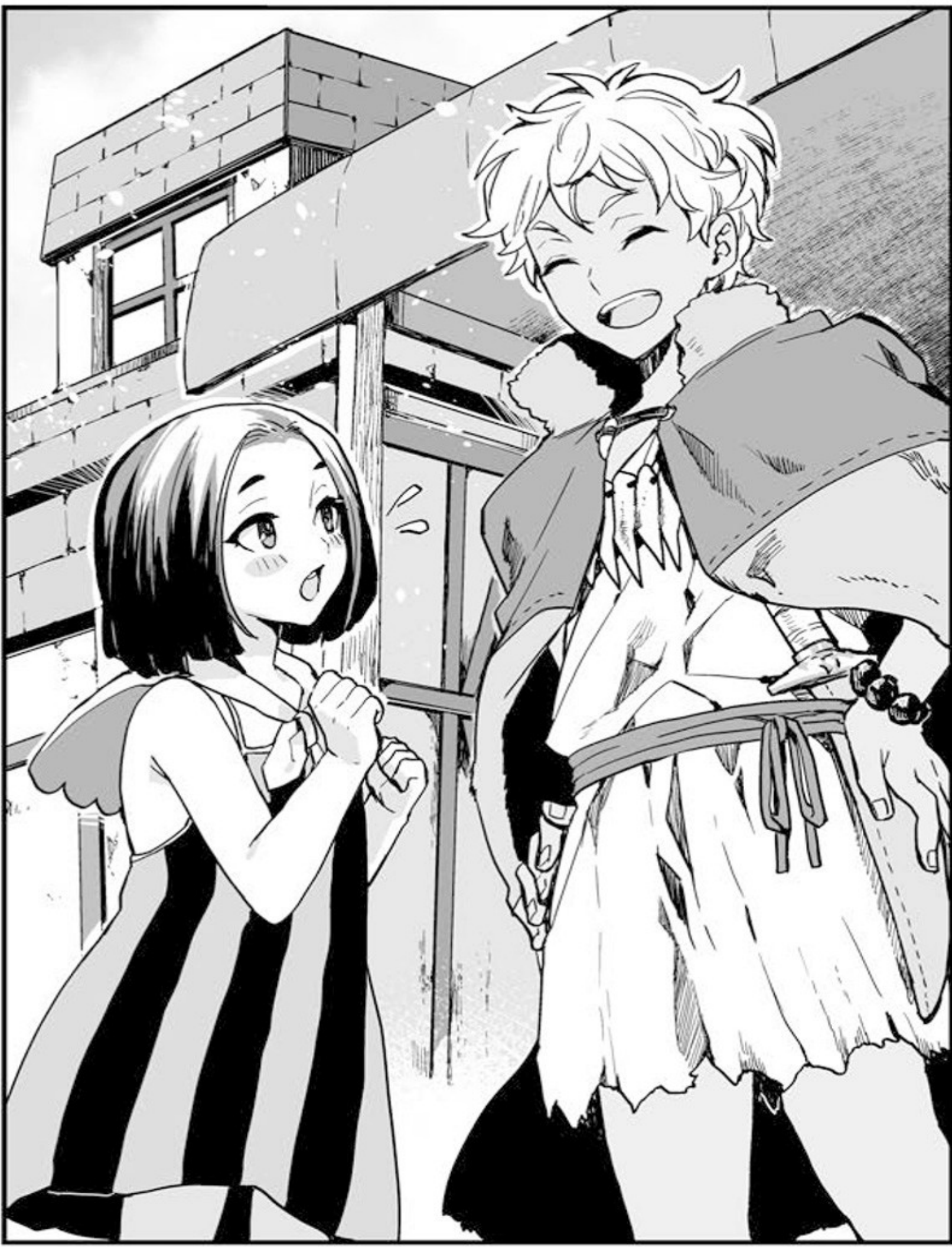
When she saw Ludo Wu smiling, Tara also smiled timidly.

「Y-You know, I chatted with Rimee Wu recently. Are you her brother?」

「Oh, I know about that. She kept talking about that during dinner. You two brats sure get along well.」

I glanced at the heartwarming reunion, then leaned towards Uncle Dora.

「I want to tell you that the city will be announcing something soon...」



After hearing about the entire incident, his face turned paler.

「T-This is a serious matter. A vicious criminal from Forest's Edge...」

「That's right. They might not have any reasons to harm a resident in the Post Station Town, but don't go near a man who is all skin and bones, as well as an old man with greying hair.」

「I-I understand. Even though they are denizens of Forest's Edge, the people from the Genos castle will still treat them as criminals. That shows how vicious they are. I won't let Tara wander outside by herself today.」

「Yes. I hope you can tell the people you know too. Speaking of which, I have something I want to ask...」

I decided to clear the doubt that appeared in my mind last night.

In other words, I wanted to know the specific period of time when the denizens of Forest's Edge allegedly committed crimes.

「Ehh? Even if you ask me... Aren't those ruffians causing trouble in the city right now?」

「Are you talking about drunk denizens of Forest's Edge drawing their blades in the Post Station Town or destroying stalls they don't like? I want to know about more serious crimes. Like abducting women or stealing crops.」

「Hmm, let me think... It has been a long time since the denizens of Forest's Edge robbed our crops. That's before Tara was born. Aside from that, I only heard rumors... You have to ask the people in the Genos castle for more accurate details.」

「The people in Genos castle?」

「That's right. Some people might just shrug it off, but most people will still report it to the guards.」

It seemed difficult to get the answer. The people in Genos castle had been ignoring the misdeeds of Forest's Edge denizens all the while, they had to be trying to cover this up.

「Asuta, don't get embroiled in too much trouble.」

Uncle Dora suddenly grabbed my arm.

「I know you are a good person, so that's enough for me. Asuta, leave the criminals to the guards and just work hard in your job.」

「... Thank you. I'm happy to hear you say that.」

I only manage to sprout such cliché lines, but I was really touched beyond words.

After leaving his stall, our destination was just a short hop away.

I knew there would be a crowd at my stall, but there weren't just customers, there were more guards on duty than usual.

「Uwah, the atmosphere seems terrible.」

Lala Wu whispered.

The atmosphere did seem hostile. The crowd was facing the guards with tense faces.

After we got closer, a guard with a plume on his helmet and who seemed to have the highest rank shouted: 「You guys are too slow!」

Although we left the Fa house early, we had to detour to the Wu clan village and enter the Post Station Town with our escorts, so we were half an hour late.

But the stall owners had the right to choose their business hours, so the guards didn't have any rights to lecture us... I couldn't tell him that so curtly of course, so I bowed my head and apologized:

「Pardon me, I will start preparations right away. Please wait a moment.」

Then something strange happened. One-third of the crowd dispersed immediately.

Their unnatural movements surprised me. The ones who left were westerners with yellowish-brown and ivory skin, and their faces were filled with hostility and fear.

The six guards watched them depart, then turned and left too.

「That's all I have to say. You have no problems with that, right? If anything happens, I will really arrest you all.」

The head guard left with that parting shot.

The guests all looked indignant and kept quiet as the guards headed to the north. Normally, the guards would return to the guardhouse on the south. They were probably going directly to the northern entrance to patrol.

Could just six guards ward off the assault of the vicious criminals? I only had four escorts with me, but I didn't think the six soldiers would be more effective than us.

「Hi, sorry for the commotion. Please don't mind and start doing your business.」

We pushed the cart to our usual spots, and Arudas said to us with a smile.

He didn't seem too guarded at the sight of Ai Fa and the others. That made me relieved and I asked:

「What happened?」



「 Well, we were waiting for you to set up shop when those guards came over. They told us: 『 Felons had escaped from the Forest's Edge and might come near this stall. Those who value their lives should leave at once.』 」

「 … I see, so that's what happened. 」

They ordered the denizens of Forest's Edge to 「 continue with business 」 , but warned the residents to 「 leave at once 」 . So Pyschkurewuss just wanted us to play the role of bait and didn't care about the tense relationship between the Forest's Edge and Post Station Town.

I became even more moody.

「 We ignored them and continued queueing, but the westerners who heard them became agitated and demand them to bar dangerous individuals like you from the Post Station Town. My southern brethrens were enraged by this and refuted them, and the commotion intensified. 」

My heart grew heavy as I listened.

Arudas laughed heartily:

「 Don't show such a face. We already resolved the issue, and no one was taken away by the guards. When they heard me shout: 『 You can't eat the delicious food if you keep arguing 』 , all of them quieted down. Only the westerners remained rowdy to the very end. 」

「 Hmmp, the westerners are more timid than anyone else. They are fine business partners, but frustrating during times like this. 」

Pops who was hidden behind Arudas' large body suddenly popped out.

「 They might have committed serious felonies, but there are just two outlaws, right? Why are they forgoing delicious food for those two? How retarded. 」

「 … Pops, think about it from our perspective. We can't do any work if the guards take you away. 」

Arudas said resignedly, and Pops grunted again.

「 Enough about that, I have something important to say. Hey, brat! 」

「 Y-Yes!? 」

「 I ate the dinner provided by the inn! If I eat it together with fruit wine, the meal will cost me seven red copper plates! 」

「 Ehh? Isn't one portion five red copper plates? 」

「 One bottle of fruit wine isn't enough! What's with that dish!? 」

「 … Is it not to your liking? 」

I asked worriedly, and he yelled:

「That's impossible!」

「Pops, don't be so loud. What if the guards come back?」

「Who gives a damn about them!? Since you have Tau sauce, why didn't you use it in the other dishes!? What is going on here!? You think it's funny seeing us so confused?」

「I-I'm not trying to do that. I only learned of the Tau sauce's existence after visiting the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.」

「What? You made such a delicious dish after using Tau sauce for the first time?」

Arudas was dumbstruck.

I chopped some tino as I shook my head.

「No, my hometown has a seasoning similar to Tau sauce, so I chose to make that dish. Do you like it?」

「I love it. To us, Tau sauce has the taste of home... But we have never tasted something so delicious back in my hometown.」

Arudas smiled with satisfaction.

Pops leaned forth from his side.

「Oh right, I don't know your name. I'm Balan of Nerva.」

「I'm Asuta of the Fa house, a denizen of Forest's Edge.」

「Asuta of the Fa house, huh... Asuta, if you ever get the chance to visit Jaguar, do come to Nerva. Just mention the architect Balan, almost everyone there knows me.」

「Eh? O-Okay.」

「... And if you plan to build a house in the future, do contact me, I will build a grand house for you at a price better than the other architects.」

After saying that, Pops crossed his arm and held his chest high proudly.

「Alright then, when will the food be done? You made us wait for so long today, I'm starving!」

「Yes! Right away!」

Pops and the others had the same attitude towards us. No, after I started selling meals at the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, they seemed friendlier to me.

The customers behind were the same too. Be it the frank and forthright southerners, or the calm and collected easterners, no one thought much about the matter of Zattsu Tsun.

However, the gulf between us and the westerners had grown deeper.

Uncle Dora and the others were very worried about our safety. As for those who had been buying kiba dishes all along, they weren't too concerned. However, the westerners who harbored doubts about the denizens of Forest's Edge were freaked out.

*That might be so— but since we have decided to do this, we will have to do it properly.*

News of the Forest's Edge felons had spread throughout the city. Since they had seen our shameful and unsightly side, we had to do our best to prove our innocence.

This line of thought was similar to the superficial words said by Pyschkurewuss. Since the denizens of Forest's Edge allowed the Tsun clan fall into depravity unabated, we had to take responsibility. With that in mind, this might be a tribulation that the denizens of Forest's Edge had to face— a road to redemption.

「... Asuta, can you really cook delicious meal with such a sour face? 」

Ai Fa whispered into my ears.

「Don't worry, if the vicious criminals appear, we will deal with them swiftly. 」

Ludo Wu and the others had retreated into the woods before I realized it, and only Ai Fa was left behind.

I looked at Ai Fa's brave expression and nodded:

「I understand. Shela Wu, I'm counting on you. 」

「Yes. 」

Shela Wu tossed the aria into the griddle, and we opened for business.

## Part 6

Right before noon, Rii Sudora reached the stall on time.

She brought four men from the Sudora house with her.

「Sorry for the wait, I will be in your care today too. 」

Her face didn't look any different but the house head standing beside her looked nervous.

「Head of the Fa house, there have been no signs of the vicious criminals so far. 」

「It's great that you are all safe.」

「Yes, we will protect our brethrens with our lives.」

The head of the Sudora house looked like a monkey's, and his sunken eyes were burning. His spouse Rii Sudora showed a calm smile.

「House head, if the men from Forest's Edge show their hunting faces, the residents in town won't dare come near. Please restrain yourself.」

「Hmm? We can't be so relaxed. The former head of the Tsun clan is all skin and bones, but he defeated the men of the Jean house. During the house head conference, I also realized that man from the Tsun clan branch house is formidable too. We need to have the resolve to die in battle.」

It was true that the head of the Sudora house was shorter than his wife and had a small build. It was rare seeing a man with such stature amongst all the hunks of Forest's Edge.

However, there was a grim determination on his face. With the way things had turned out, he could have asked his wife to help out after Zattsu Tsun got arrested, but he didn't turn this job down and suggested being the escorts. All four men of the Sudora house were here, and the rest of the women were entrusted to the Wu clan village to seek refuge.

「Head of the Sudora house, the men from the Wu clan are hiding in the woods over there. They had set the assignment to watch the road and guard the rear, do consult them on your role.」

After hearing Ai Fa's words, the head of the Sudora house nodded and led his posse to the woods at the back. In a short while, Vena Wu and I would need to head to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, Ai Fa and her entourage of four would escort us there. The four men of the Sudora house would stay behind and guard the women in the stall.

After the men from the Sudora house were gone, the men from the 《Silver Vase》 approached us.

「Welcome, thank you for your patronage even at a time like this.」

「Yes, wanted notice, we see... Asuta, okay?」

「We are fine, please be careful too. The wanted notice should have mentioned how dangerous the felons are.」

「Fine, we are. I worry, you. Guards say, attack you, they may.」

What the guards said probably resulted in the obvious drop in westerner customers. Even the crowd on the streets was less dense than usual.

Uncle Dora visited with Tara, but other regulars like Yumi didn't patronize us. If we didn't arrest the vicious criminals, the westerner residents would remain fearful and uneasy.

「Thank you. We are really fine, there are many powerful hunters protecting us.」

I tried to answer with a smile, but Shumimaru's gaze remained serious.

He suddenly shifted his gaze to Ai Fa who was standing beside the stall.

「... House head, me, 《Silver Vase》 band leader, Shumimaru Jiz Sadumutino.」

「Hmm?」

Ai Fa was standing between the two stalls and watching the people passing by, but she was looking at Shumimaru puzzledly now.

「By house head, you mean me? I don't know you.」

「Asuta, tell me. You tell me, name?」

Ai Fa frowned and sized up Shumimaru.

「I'm Ai Fa of the Fa house. Sorry, but I don't have time to chat.」

「Ai Fa, name good... you, Asuta protect?」

「... Yes, the house head has to protect her family member.」

Ai Fa answered and returned her gaze to the road. Ai Fa's role was to stay on the front lines and look out for suspicious characters in the crowd.

「Please, Asuta protect. Cherish him, I, a lot.」

Ai Fa glanced at Shumimaru again.

「... I don't need anyone to tell me that, I will protect him.」

「Thank you.」

Shumimaru narrowed his eyes a little, thanked her quietly, and then looked at the other stall.

Vena Wu was working hard as usual.

So she was special to Shumimaru after all.

Shumimaru didn't reveal his feelings and left with his food.

「Asuta, that Semu man is very worried about you. Did you know him before this?」

Lala Wu was tending to the 『Kiba burger』 stall with me, and she asked me with an incredulous expression.

「No, we don't really know each other. We got acquainted when he bought my food.」

「Hmmp, that's weird... Never mind, your relationship with the Wu clan started in the same way. So it isn't that strange after all.」

That's true. My friendship with others always started with these simple dishes.

Shumimaru was very close to me, and I also cherished my friendship with Pops Balan, whose name I just learned today, and Arudas.

We only chatted for a few minutes every day, but that was still a bond between us. With the passage of time, our bonds grew stronger. And that was how I managed to survive in this different world.

After a short while, when it was almost time for me to head to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, Kaslan Lutim, Dali Sauti and a man from the Sauti clan appeared before us.

「Ah, good morning, how was the meeting with Kamyua Yost?」

「The work tomorrow remains unchanged. As expected, they claimed that they don't need any escorts.」

「Don't need escorts?」

Tomorrow, the denizens of Forest's Edge will guide Zashuma's caravan through the forest. And, of course, we couldn't halt this grand project. But why wouldn't they need escorts?

「We don't know what Zattsu Tsun will do, so we proposed sending all the men from the Sauti clan to escort them. But they said that they just need the denizens of Forest's Edge to act as their guides, so just the four men that were agreed in the first place will be fine.」

「But... wouldn't that be dangerous?」

「Yes, but there are only two vicious criminals, so sending four men will be adequate. But when we suggested increasing the number of helpers just to be safe, they thought we were being too nosey and turned us down. I hate the Genos castle people after all.」

Dali Sauti answered.

He was taller than Kaslan Lutim and as buff as Donda Wu. Although his face looked kind and gentle, his outstanding looks made him suitable for the crucial position of tribal chief. He should be slightly older than Kaslan Lutim.

He used to give me the impression of being warm and approachable, but he tended to tense up during an emergency. It was difficult for him to negotiate with Kamyua Yost given the current circumstances.

「He has his own pride and self-esteem. After all, the job of a 《Guardian》 is to protect caravans, so he wouldn't want others to get in the way of his job.」

「How unpleasant. Could it be that they are just like those people from Genos castle and want to apprehend the criminals by themselves?」

I wasn't sure about that. I didn't think that the relationship between Kamyua Yost and Pyschkurewuss was anywhere close to being cordial.

Did Kamyua Yost want to apprehend the Tsun clan felons by himself?— I couldn't grasp the thoughts of that man who kept pretending to be retarded.

「Anyway, there would be five 《Guardians》 protecting the 18-men caravan. They probably don't need to worry about just two vicious criminals... If anyone from the caravan dies or there is any damage to the cargo, the 《Guardians》 will bear full responsibility, so we don't need to be concerned.」

「I see, since Kamyua Yost insisted on that, it should be fine.」

Kamyua Yost and that man who concealed his appearance with bandages, Han of Dabag... Aside from them, there were three other 《Guardians》. After adding in the four men from Forest's Edge led by Dali Sauti, they wouldn't lose to the vicious criminals so easily. And if the two vicious criminals could really defeat them, then the escorts guarding the stalls wouldn't stand a chance either.

「Well then, we need to report this to Donda Wu, so we are going back to Forest's Edge now... Asuta, please be careful.」

And finally, Kaslan Lutim looked at me with his strong gaze and left together with Dali Sauti and the others.

「Should we go as well?. Shela Wu, please hold the fort.」

「Yes, stay safe on your way there.」

Me, Vena Wu, Ai Fa, and the three hunters who appeared from the woods left the stall together. We bought the necessary vegetables on the way there and were basked in more gazes than usual on our way to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.

「We didn't divide our tasks yet. We will need a sentry at the front and back entrances, someone to rove and watch the surroundings, and a bodyguard to go inside with Asuta.」

This was a surprise, but the youngest, Ludo Wu, showed his leadership skills while performing the escort duties.

「Ai Fa should stand at the front door, the rest can just take whatever roles that are left.」

「Wait, why am I the front door's sentry? I want to go inside the building.」

「Hmm? But the westerners won't dare to come in if we place a male sentry here, right? That uncle at the inn earlier also showed an annoyed face.」

We already reported the matter about the vicious criminals to Naudiz in the morning. I also informed him that the hunters from Forest's Edge would guard the inn just in case anything happened.

「But... I'm also an armed hunter. The westerners loathe all denizens of Forest's Edge and don't discriminate between man and woman.」

「That's not true. Ai Fa, men won't avoid a pretty girl like you.」

「In that case, your face is as gentle as a woman's too. And I'm taller than you.」

The air was getting tense; however, Rau Lei just laughed coldly:

「Head of the Fa house, that's an interesting point. I'm the tallest among us all. I will get tired of staying in the same place, so I will be the rover and watch the surroundings. Decide on the other roles however you like.」

「This has nothing to do with height! Besides, I'm almost the same height as Ai Fa!」

「... I'm a bit taller than you.」

「And I'm about her height too.」

「Shin Wu! You are mocking my height too!?」

「I didn't say that. You are a better hunter than me anyway.」

As they continued to argue, we arrived at the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.

「... I don't want to go inside a Post Station Town building, so I will guard the back door.」

After Shin Wu retired from the battle royale, Rau Lei also disappeared after saying: 「I will blow the grass whistle if anything happens.」

Only Ai Fa and Ludo Wu were left. They glared at each other, and the air was getting heated.

「... Hey, Asuta, you know the Post Station Town the best, so you decide...」

Vena Wu proposed reluctantly, and Ludo Wu shouted childishly: 「He will definitely pick Ai Fa!」

We shouldn't loiter before the inn, and they were pushing me to speak up too. I felt lethargic when I thought of Ai Fa's feelings.

「If I have to choose, I think Ai Fa is more suited for the role outside... Is that fine?」

As I expected, Ai Fa was stunned and just stood there.

「... But why?」



「Like what Ludo Wu said, westerners often lodge in this inn, so I want to avoid agitating them. This was the reason why I asked you to stay in the stall earlier.」

「You are... right...」

Ai Fa's face turned more and more sullen, and the strength-deprived eyes looked apologetically at Ludo Wu.

「... I see. I'm thinking only about myself and didn't make the right judgment. It's my fault for insisting on doing things my way.」

「Hmm? You don't need to apologize for such trivial matters.」

「... But I'm still taller than you.」

「Shut up! So what!」

「Nothing. It's painful for me, so I just wanted to jab at you a little.」

Ai Fa walked along the wall and sat down heavily about 3 meters from the inn entrance. She didn't cross her legs and hugged her knees childishly instead. She looked at the streets with gloomy eyes.

「I will watch the streets from here... Asuta.」

「Yes!」

「... Work hard.」

「... Okay.」

Why was there a sense of guilt welling up in my chest?

I swallowed the umpteenth sigh of today, then pushed open the doors with the Wu clan siblings.

「Oh, Asuta, I was waiting for you.」

Naudiz was sitting at the counter and received us with a gentle smile. He already met the men from Forest's Edge this morning, and only Ludo Wu was left now, so he wasn't tensed at all.

「Well then, I will be counting on you today too. I'm relieved that you have reached safely.」

「Sorry for the trouble because of our issues. And thank you for agreeing to the hunters of Forest's Edge guarding the premises.」

「You're welcome, since the dangerous felons are on the loose, having people guard the inn will put me at ease too. As the felons are from the Forest's Edge, the guards from the Post Station Town won't too dependable.」

He wouldn't need to worry about Zattsu Tsun attacking his inn if he just barred me from entering. But he still wanted me to continue my work as per the contract. I felt guilty and moved at the same time.

「There wasn't much time in the morning, so I didn't tell you the details. But dinner last night was very well-received. They were completely sold out, nothing was left.」

「I see, that's a relief. So you managed to sell it even after setting the price to five red copper plates.」

「That's right, I followed your suggestion and sold half portions of 『Braised kiba』 without fuwano at two red copper plates. So people who had never tried this dish and were reluctant to fork out five red copper plates could order it easily.」

Naudiz had a face of satisfaction.

I laid out the kiba meat that was left here for safekeeping and answered with a smile:

「Speaking of which, what is the ratio of the customers? Did any westerner order that dish?」

「Of course. There are many westerners lodging here for the sake of the kiba dish... but I don't know what will happen in the future though.」

I couldn't tell either.

The number of westerner customers at our stall had plummeted too. They were worried about being dragged into trouble if they came near us. But this incident shouldn't affect the sales in the inn too much. If the westerners discriminated the denizens of Forest's Edge because of this incident, it would have drastic effects.

「... Never mind, let's bear with it before the felons are apprehended. Just the southerner customers will buy out everything. I'm counting on you in the future too.」

With that, Naudiz turned and left. He didn't show it, but the presence of Ludo Wu still unnerved him.

「Sigh~, who knows when the enemy will show up, it's boring to just wait. And I can't let my guard down either, my shoulder is aching from the tension.」

Ludo Wu stretched his back and started grumbling.

「It's fine for just one or two days, visiting the town is fun too. But it will be terrible if this continues for ten or twenty days. The Sudora house will run out of food to eat.」

「It won't drag on that long, right? It will be troubling if this goes on for ten or more days.」

「But they might die even before appearing before us. If they encounter a kiba and die, they will be eaten by the Munto. Then how long do we have to keep up with this?」

Indeed, that could be possible.

Spending a night in the forest was dangerous. The deathly ill Zattsu Tsun and the aging Tay Tsun didn't have any supplies with them and could die quietly in the woods. If that happened, we would live in fear of their phantoms forever.

Just how much trouble did Zattsu Tsun plan to cause us? I didn't stop my hands as I cooked and thought about what Yamiel Lei once said— 「Zattsu Tsun is like a venom...」

Two and a half hours later, my work in the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 completed smoothly.

There wasn't any good or grave news. When we left the inn and returned to the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》, the stalls were already there. Shela Wu and the others already purchased the necessities for tomorrow and were waiting for us.

「We didn't sell everything today. The 『Kiba burgers』 were sold out, but we only sold about 80 portions of 『Myam-roasted meat』 .」

The sales weren't important, the important thing was that we made it through the day safely... That was what I wanted to say, but there was still satisfaction in my heart.

No matter what, we had to return the cart first. As I was opening the door, I heard hysterical voices coming from the inn.

「Stop renting your carts to those people! Everything will be fine if they don't enter the Post Station Town, right!？」

I grew stiff.

『Those people』 ... They were referring to us, of course.

「The Genos castle people are spoiling the denizens of Forest's Edge too much!」

「We don't want to be caught in the crossfire!」

「If you don't rent them the carts, they won't be able to continue with business, just refund them the cart rental fee!」

The voices came from a group of unfamiliar men.

When they all quieted down, Milano Mast used the chance to speak:

「... Even if I break the contract, other inns like the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 will rent them carts. Since the Genos castle permits them to continue running their stalls, there's no point arguing about this.」

「Even so, we don't need to let everything go their way, right!？」

「You want the rental fee that badly? 」

「You are also... No, amongst us, you are the one who hates the denizens of Forest's Edge the most, correct? 」

The next instant, there was a loud bang.

Someone hammered a table or wall.

「The incident with my friend has nothing to do with this! The ones pissing me off right now are you people, not the denizens of Forest's Edge! Are you done!? Then get lost! Don't disrupt my business! 」

I backed away from the door quickly.

The men pushed open the door from the inside and rushed out. They then yelped and stood there stiffly.

They had to be freaking out after seeing more than ten denizens of Forest's Edge lining up in front of the door. This group of men had yellowish-brown skin and looked like merchants. Their faces were twisted from despair, and they were quivering.

I was the only one who overheard them. Lala Wu and Ludo Wu who were beside me looked surprised.

「... Excuse me, we need to go in, can you let us pass? 」

I tried to speak as calmly possible, and the men fled like spooked rabbits.

After watching them leave, I wanted to walk forth again, and the peeved Milano Mast opened the door from the inside and appeared before us.

「What, you done with your business already? Don't crowd at my door, it gets in the way. 」

「Yes, sorry. 」

We didn't need too many people to push the carts, so the four escorts and I pushed it to the back of the inn under Milano Mast's lead.

「Excuse me... Will you still rent the carts to us tomorrow? 」

I asked as I pushed the cart, and Milano Mast threw a sideways glance at me.

「I already told you before. If the cart gets damaged from any mishaps, you will need to compensate me. Anything else you need me to explain? 」

「There's nothing... Thank you. 」

And of course, he grunted unhappily after I said that.

When we reached the warehouse at the back of the inn, a tall scrawny blonde man was waiting for us to come there.

「Hi, thank you for the hard work. And thanks for the delicious meal earlier too.」

「What are you doing here?」

Milano Mast asked in surprise, and Kamyua Yost smiled casually.

「Nothing, I'm just waiting for Asuta here in order not to miss him. If I rest in the restaurant, I might doze off.」

This was the first time I met Kamyua Yost today. Since he ate the food from the stall, he must have visited when I went to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》.

「I'm happy to see you, Kamyua. It seems that you can set off as scheduled tomorrow.」

「Yes, that's why I'm here to greet you. We will be setting off first thing in the morning, and it will be at least two months before we come back.」

Two months... I had only been here for 50-odd days, so it was hard for me to imagine such a long period of time.

Recently, the relationship between Forest's Edge and Genos had become complicated. Was Kamyua Yost's leaving a good thing? I couldn't tell. No matter what, his departure was inevitable, so the people staying behind would have to settle these problems ourselves.

「By the way, I heard you turned down their offer to increase the manpower? Is it really safe?」

「Hmm? Yes, of course! It's just two felons, there's nothing to worry about...! Besides, the outlaws who lost their minds and fled from the Forest's Edge settlement don't have any reasons to assault us, right?」

「No, it's exactly because they lost their senses that we don't know what they will do... And it is very possible that they will attack the caravan.」

「Ehh, why?」

Kamyua Yost's eyes sparkled and he looked excited. But I was worried since Milano Mast was present too. This matter had nothing to do with him, but he might not want to hear me mentioning the criminals from Forest's Edge.

Milano Mast checked the carts for damage nonchalantly.

「... Someone in the Tsun clan mentioned something strange before. According to her, people live for the sake of earning copper plates, and since the richest clan in Forest's Edge is the Tsun clan,

the head of the Tsun clan is the strongest brave... I think the former clan head passed down these twisted values to the members of the Tsun clan main house.」

「Hmm? It means that in the eyes of the former clan head, the caravan and its valuable cargo is the most suitable prey? What an interesting idea.」

「It would be great if this is just an interesting matter. However, the wanted fugitive, former clan head, said that he wants to 『Return the Tsun clan to power』. I think his goal is to obtain more wealth and not attack enemy factions like the Wu clan and Fa house.」

「Haha, but even if he gets more wealth, can he return the Tsun clan back to power?」

「That's impossible. Only the former clan head is harboring such thoughts. Most of the denizens of Forest's Edge think excessive wealth is unnecessary and only want enough to sustain themselves.」

「How intriguing. I wish I could chat more with you before I set off to Semu.」

Kamyua Yost showed a lonely smile.

「I understand. So the former clan head who had turned into a felon might assault the caravan. I'm really pumped now... This might sound arrogant, but the job of a 《Guardian》 is to deal with such transgressions. It will be boring if the trip is too uneventful.」

He looked at the hunters of Forest's Edge with his purple eyes.

Ai Fa, Ludo Wu, Shin Wu and Rau Lei— they were observing every move of this man who was pretending to be retarded.

「The residents of Rock City might defeat the former tribal chief of Forest's Edge. You won't hold a grudge against us for that, correct?」

「Of course, we won't. It might be a little infuriating, but we won't ask you to not defend yourself... No matter who your opponent might be, you probably can cut them in half.」

Ludo Wu replied.

「Not really.」

Kamyua Yost waved his slender arms.

「If possible, I want to take him alive. But my comrades are more violent, so I'm happy to hear you say that... But the former tribal chief might still attack Asuta, so let's pray for the safety of both of us.」

「That's right. Let's meet again two months later.」

After I answered, Milano Mast finally left the carts.

「There doesn't seem to be any damage... If there's nothing else, scram.」

「Yes, thank you.」

Milano Mast didn't even look at me.

As expected, he didn't want to hear us mention about the criminals. I felt an ache in my heart and turned towards Kamyua Yost.

「Have a safe trip, Kamyua.」

「Yes, you stay safe too. Farewell, Ai Fa.」

Ai Fa acknowledged him with a cold gaze, and we ended the short chat with Kamyua Yost.

If one of us met with any misfortune, this would be a farewell for forever— but this felt unreal to me.

On our way back, a figure broke through the crowd and charged towards me. Ai Fa stood in front of me right away, but that person wasn't the vicious criminals, but Yumi from the 《West Wind Inn》.

「Asuta, sorry! It's because my retarded father won't let me visit your stall!」

She charged over at full speed and clung to my chest.

「Ehh? W-What happened to your father?」 :

I answered after noticing Ai Fa narrowing her eyes icily.

「It's because of the commotion about the criminals from Forest's Edge! So my dad won't let me leave the house! He went out just now, so I sneaked out, but you have already closed...」

「Y-Yeah, our opening hours are over.」

「That's right. So I... uwah, what are you people doing!」

Yumi just noticed the presence of Ludo Wu and the others and clung even harder onto my chest.

We had not met up with the others yet, so there were only four hunters present. But that was enough to invoke fear and wariness in Yumi. She was usually strong and confident, but she was shivering and clinging to my chest right now.

「I-It's fine. They are with me... Erm, this is a regular patron of the stall, she is the daughter of the 《West Wind Inn》.」

Ludo Wu and Shin Wu had dubious expressions, while Rau Lei showed a blank face. As for Ai Fa— she was expressionless, and her half-closed eyes were ice-cold.

Yumi looked at them timidly.

「Y-You are Asuta's friends, right? Sorry, I was just surprised. This is the first time I saw so many men from the Forest's Edge...」

「The men of Forest's Edge don't visit the town often... So what's the matter?」

「Hmm? Oh right! I just wanted to apologize for not visiting today! It's great that I got to meet you.」

She finally pulled away from me, but she was still grabbing onto my T-shirt and looked at me worriedly.

「Apologize...? You don't need to do that for something so trivial though.」

「But I don't want you to misunderstand! I won't look at you any differently even if the other denizens of Forest's Edge commit misdeeds...! You will come tomorrow, right? You won't disappear, right?」

「A-Alright. I plan to set up shop tomorrow too...」

「I see. That's good... There are people who are stubborn like my dad, but there are those who can differentiate right from wrong too! Please don't hate the Post Station Town because of that, okay?」

「... If someone tells me that, I won't hate this place.」

Yumi smiled cheerfully.

Ai Fa's gaze was sharp enough to hurt me, but I felt my heart being soothed completely.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> of the Blue month, there were signs of trouble, but the day ended peacefully... And finally came this day.

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of the Blue month, a 20-odd-men strong caravan would pass through the Forest's Edge settlement and head to the eastern kingdom of Semu.

The same day, I finally met a certain person.

This man was the origin of all evil, the reason for the depravity of the Tsun clan— the former clan head of the Tsun clan, Zattsu Tsun.



## Chapter 3 - Malefic Star

### Part 1

It was the Blue Month 15<sup>th</sup>.

Although this day didn't end peacefully, it began in the usual manner.

Forest's Edge remained on high alert. We woke at dawn and carried what we needed to wash and went out. The Dom house men who kept watch over our house stood in front of our door.

There were four of them, and they lit fires at all four corners of the Fa house and took turns to rest and keep watch against any attacks.

「Good morning, we are going to clean up last night's dinner.」

The four men wearing kiba skulls nodded silently.

It was a bit embarrassing to treat them to the leftover merchandise, but I served them 『Myam-roasted meat』 for dinner last night. Of all the honest and strong denizens of Forest's Edge, the men from the north were especially fierce. As Zattsu Tsun had trampled the honor of the Dom house, they were infuriated. However, their expressions seemed to be carved from stone and didn't show any emotions.

One of the four men stayed behind to keep watch over the house, while the other three followed us to the water source. After being attacked by Zattsu Tsun and letting Tay Tsun get away, they volunteered to protect the Fa house to redeem the honor of the Dom house.

They were eager to take vengeance against the vicious criminals themselves. They intended to protect the Fa house at all hours, so we didn't need to worry about the house being set on fire or our food being poisoned, and could focus on doing business in the Post Station Town.

After finishing the morning chores, we dropped by the Wu clan village, met up with Shela Wu, Ludo Wu, and the others, then headed to the Post Station Town.

We thought that the attack would most likely happen on our trip there, but we managed to reach the Post Station Town safely and began working quietly.

*Kamyua Yost and the others should be in the middle of the Morga forest now.*

I thought in a daze as I roasted the meat with the griddle.

They set off from Genos at dawn and reached the Wu clan village in 40 to 50 minutes. After that they spent two hours to travel south to the Sauti village— so they should be advancing through the forest right now.

They would go around the Morga mountain and head to the east and get out of the forest after half a day. The route seemed incredibly long, and this was just the beginning of a two-month journey.

*Where will Zattsu Tsun strike...? Or will Ludo Wu's words come true, and he will just pass away quietly in the forest...?*

I sighed without realizing it when I thought about this.

My partner Lala Wu standing beside me grumbled unhappily:

「Hmm~, there are so few customers. I'm losing my drive.」

「That's not true. Our sales aren't that bad.」

That being said, business was a little slow. Our sales were the same as before because westerner customers were rare in the first place.

However, Uncle Dora still visited while holding Tara's hand tightly and bought the pot dealer's and clothes shop owner's, as well as his and Tara's share. Yumi showed up as she promised yesterday. I could only hope that they wouldn't get caught up in any trouble and work hard with my teeth gritted.

「Ah, welcome!」

At this moment, a group approached us, as if they came to cheer us up. I received them with a sincere smile.

The 《Silver Vase》, the merchant group from the east, were all here. Shumimaru took off his hood as usual, then stood in front of my stall wordlessly and stared at me.

「Erm~, five each for today too?」

「Yes.」

He nodded and then fell silent again.

Was it my imagination? His eyes seemed a little sad.

「What's the matter, Shumimaru?」

「No... something, I hear.」

「Something?」

「Inn southerner, your food, eat.」

「Ah, are you referring to the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》？」

He was quiet again, with sorrow in his eyes.

At this point, I could more or less guess what he was thinking.

「W-Well, because the innkeeper of the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》 is a mixed blood between the south and the west, so when he heard about the rave reviews of my cooking, he requested us to cater dinner for them...」

「Your food eat, dinner, blessed.」

「T-Thank you. But this has to depend on the innkeeper...」

「Innkeeper, westerner, cannot?」

「W-What?」

「《Cryptic Venerable Inn》 innkeeper, westerner. Westerner, no like?」

「T-That's not true. We have westerner customers at this stall too. I also hope that the denizens of Forest's Edge could get along better with westerners.」

Shumimaru leaned forward a little.

「Innkeeper 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》, same wish. 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》, dinner, yes?」

「I-Is that the name of the inn you are lodging in? If he is willing to work together with me, I will be happy to...」

「Him, I tell. Innkeeper 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》, happy will be... We all, happy.」

「I will be glad if we can work together. Shumimaru, thank you for always giving me wonderful suggestions, I'm very grateful.」

Shumimaru shied away and lowered his head a little.

「... I, composure lost, ashamed.」

Did he lose his composure just now?

In that case, wouldn't I be agitated the entire time?

「But can you give me some time? I can't move about freely during this period. Given the current circumstances, it is better for me not to travel around the Post Station Town too much...」

「It's fine, ending soon, the disaster.」

「Huh?」

「My brethren, astrologist. Say he, Forest's Edge, malefic star, vanished.」

Speaking of which, the eastern kingdom of Semu was also known as the kingdom of magic and shamanism. It wouldn't be strange for astrologist to exist.

「Will sure disappear. Disaster, resolve. Star movement, absolute.」

「I see. Alright then, if you are still in Genos when the felon is arrested, I will discuss this with the innkeeper...」

Shumimaru shook his head, as if he was trying to interject.

It was rare saying this calm young man show such an anxious attitude.

「No, malefic star, vanish will— today, vanish.」

「Today?」

「Today. Malefic star, vanish will, today.」

Shumimaru leaned forth once again.

「Asuta, careful. Strong star vanish, affect will, other stars. Change fate many... When vanish disaster, weak star affect.」

How should I describe my current emotions?

In English culture, the phrase 'someone walking over my grave' comes to mind... An indescribable chill went down my spine, and I shivered.

「... Innkeeper 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》, I inform. Disaster end, please do.」

Finally, he narrowed his eyes as if he was pitying me and left together with his brethrens.

「He is as elusive as ever.」

Lala Wu said with a smile. But I couldn't smile back.

I felt unease in my chest.

“The malefic star will vanish. The fates of many will be affected.”— this was an ominous prophecy. If Zattsu Tsun was the malefic star, then everything fitted, which made me afraid.

*Instead of him dying quietly in the forest, I hope he can be apprehended. However...*

Would I suffer heavy losses too? Zattsu Tsun had been bedridden for very long years, did he really have so much strength lingering in his body?

I couldn't fathom the results of that divination and felt more and more uneasy.

「... Ah, it's a Totos.」

Lala Wu muttered nonchalantly.

An easterner came alone from the north with a Totos in tow.

「It was noisy early in the morning today. Rimee and the others were excited because of the Totos walking inside Forest's Edge.」

「Oh, so the caravan transports their cargo with Totos. Lala Wu, did you see them off too?」

「Yes, I just finished my work at the water source and was about to head out. They were a group that gave off bad vibes. All of them had their faces covered like Semu people.」

I chatted energetically as usual with Lala Wu, and my unease was soothed a little.

Not just Lala Wu, all the Wu clan women had strong wills and didn't show any fear towards the possibility of Zattsu Tsun attacking. They felt so reliable, and I couldn't match their courage at all.

「It feels uncomfortable seeing people from the city walking arrogantly inside the Forest's Edge settlement. I hope this will be the first and last time this happens.」

「No, this isn't the first time, right? A caravan passed by Forest's Edge before, when they were heading towards Semu.」

「Ah, that's right. I don't remember something from so long ago, I was just two back then.」

「Huh? Had it been that long since the last caravan passed by Forest's Edge?」

I was a little surprised and asked. Lala Wu nodded.

「Shin Wu's first younger brother was born that year, so it has been ten years. I was two back then, so, of course, I can't remember.」

「I see... so that's what happened...」

But why?

Why did I feel a sense of unease?

It shouldn't matter to me how many years ago that happened. It shouldn't matter to me— but I felt something stir in my chest.

A decade ago, a large caravan passed through the Forest's Edge settlement. However, they were all wiped out in a kiba attack. It wasn't clear if the guide was inept or the caravan was ill-prepared.

Tens of lives were lost in the forest.

They were residents of Genos, not denizens of Forest's Edge.

*Could it be...*

A sense of dissonance was taking a vague form.

This wasn't the first time I felt like this. I felt the same way two days ago.

Back then, Zattsu Tsun was still imprisoned in the Jean house. Therefore, I was just worried about the meeting between Kaslan Lutim and Kamyua Yost and didn't think much about Zattsu Tsun. I then thought about what happened when Kamyua Yost arrived at the Wu clan village twenty days ago...

*That's right, Kamyua also mentioned the caravan back then... No, was it Donda Wu who brought it up? Anyway, they did discuss this matter. To think it happened ten years ago...*

I already forgot what they said. I thought that matter happened a few years ago and had nothing to do with me.

That remained the same now. Whether the tragedy with the caravan happened five or ten years ago, it had nothing to do with me.

However, one thing did change. I knew a person who passed away because of the Genos incident ten years ago. I heard about it from someone unrelated to the matter.

That person was Milano Mast's close friend, his wife's brother.

That unnamed person died a decade ago.

*Was he... a member of the caravan?*

Milano Mast claimed that a denizen of Forest's Edge murdered his close friend. The evidence was the necklace of kiba tusks and horns clasped in his friend's hand.

I remember that he fell off a cliff...

Thinking about it carefully, there were no hills near the Post Station Town. From what I knew, only the Morga forest had cliffs that would be fatal to fall from.

So Milano Mast's close friend was a member of the caravan and died in the forest?

The one who attacked him wasn't the kiba, but a denizen of Forest's Edge.

*A decade ago— Zattsu Tsun stepped down from the post of clan head. Anyway, it was more likely for Zattsu Tsun to do something so lawless, compared to Zuro Tsun. Even if he was already ill, he could order his minions to act and didn't have to do it himself.*

Was the 「minion」 Tay Tsun?

I tried piecing the puzzles together, and an unsightly picture appeared.

But the image wasn't finished. It seemed that the possibility of Zashuma's caravan getting attacked was more likely now.

This wasn't surprising news. The possibility might be ten percent or ninety percent, but Kamyua Yost and the others couldn't let their guard down. Even if the possibility of Zattsu Tsun attacking had grown, it wouldn't affect the caravan any differently.

However, this wasn't enough.

The dissonance in my heart still lingered.

「... Asuta, are you alright? 」

Lala Wu suddenly poked my flank. I was genuinely surprised.

「We have customers. If you are not feeling well, let me handle it. 」

「No, it's fine. Please wait a moment... 」

I got even more surprised mid-sentence.

The one standing with a smile in front of the stall was Leito.

「Huh? Leito, are you staying behind in Genos? 」

「Yes. The work this time is very dangerous, so Kamyua ordered me to watch the house. How mean, I will be alone for these two months. 」

Leito showed an innocent smile, then tilted his head cutely and said: 「I just want one portion today. 」, and handed over two red copper plates.

「Thank you for your patronage... What will you do now? Is Genos your hometown? 」

「Yes, but I don't have a home or any family. 」

The brown-haired boy was still smiling.

「My mother passed away after giving birth to me. I resided in the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 because of fate. Two years ago, I met Kamyua who happened to lodge at that inn and became his disciple. 」

「Ehh? Are you Milano Mast's adopted son? 」

「No, he only let me stay with him out of good will. I'm a family member of Kamyua now and am paying lodging fees to Milano Mast too. 」

He had a harder childhood than I imagined.

That must be why this boy had such a mature air about him.

「Milano Mast treats me well, but I want to see the different sights of this world, so I chose to stay with the nomadic Kamyua. If I stay by his side, I will learn the skills to live on my own. 」

「I see... It should be hard to live alone for two months.」

「Not at all, I have always been alone.」

Leito showed a warm and tamed smile.

「My father was the bandleader of a large caravan, but he died ten years ago in an unfortunate accident. My mother passed away shortly... I was just born then and therefore don't have any memories.」

I almost dropped the 『Kiba burger』 I just made into the pot.

Leito stared at me with his brown eyes.

「You didn't know? Kamyua didn't tell me to keep it a secret, so it's fine.」

「Leito... Then, Milano Mast's close friend is...」

「You mean the Milano Mast's brother-in-law? My father was his business partner. Milano Mast must have overlapped his wife's image with my mother's and thinks that I'm very pitiful. He treats me and his daughter the same and cares for us.」

「...」

「Please don't show such a face. I didn't have any parents in the first place, so I don't understand the pain of losing them.」

Leito's smile looked even more innocent as he took the 『Kiba burger』 from me.

「I'm going then. I will be visiting every day.」

Leito's petite figure disappeared in the other end of the street.

I watched him go in a daze and heard the last piece of the puzzle clicking into place.

Kamyua Yost already suspected that the murderer behind the caravan that was wiped out ten years ago could be a denizen of Forest's Edge.

That was why he formulated this plan.

And didn't take Leito with him.

He didn't want to see Leito suffer the same fate as his father...

*But the situation now is different from a decade ago. If that incident ten years ago was a scheme of the Tsun clan, only Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun could pull off such a barbaric act. The two of them alone can't take out the caravan protected by the four hunters and five 《Guardians》 ... They would fail if they attack forcefully...*

Even after the jigsaw was completed, my conclusion remained the same.



But my heart still felt uneasy.

I was worried during work the entire day, and time seemed to pass even more slowly.

## Part 2

Work finished smoothly today too.

There weren't any issues with work today.

We had just finished packing up when a certain group of people reached the Post Station Town.

After we were done with the food preparation at the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, I met up with the rest at the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》 like I did yesterday.

Ai Fa was the one who noticed 「them」.

「... The other end of the street is noisy.」

Ai Fa pushed me to the side of the road when she said that and covered my entire body. Before I noticed anything was amiss, Ludo Wu directed the women behind him and looked to the south with hunter's eyes.

「W-What is it? What's happening?」

「I don't know, there's a disturbance in the air... Something is coming our way.」

This was the middle of the Post Station Town. Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun wouldn't just walk here in broad daylight, right?

「In that case, we should hurry and return the carts, then leave the Post Station Town.」

「Don't move for now. The vicious criminals don't intend to attack. But, this is...」

Ai Fa became quiet. Her profile was filled with doubt and wariness.

And then... 「they」 came.

The pedestrians who didn't notice stopped and fled to the sides of the road.

The noise approached gradually like the signs of an earthquake.

Screams from young girls seemed to be coming from afar.

「That's...」

I couldn't help putting my hand on Ai Fa's shoulders and leaning forward. But Ai Fa wouldn't budge, and I couldn't poke my face in front of her shoulder.

A strange group was coming our way from the south.

It was a big procession, with all of them wearing hooded cloaks and walking at a leisurely pace.

The head of two Totos Moa suddenly poked out from the crowd. These two Totos were pulling one large wagon.

The road was about 10 m wide, so the pedestrians could easily avoid them and move on. But everyone just kept to the side of the road and stopped to watch the procession with bated breath. That was how queer the air about this group was.

「Sorry! We are not dangerous, so don't worry! But don't come too close!」

A stout man standing at their very fore laughed heartily.

His voice surprised me. We were 7 to 8 meters from that group, and they were wearing hooded cloaks, so I couldn't see his face. But I have heard this crude voice before.

The owner of the voice shouldn't be in the Post Station Town... He was the bandleader of the caravan heading towards Semu— the voice belonged to Zashuma.

Which meant that the procession he was leading consisted of his caravan members.

However, they were supposed to be in the forest at the foot of the Morga mountain.

Besides, despite the caravan's great numbers, I only saw two Totos, and they didn't have any other cargo with them.

And then... my sense of smell told me the true nature of this strange atmosphere.

Two different scents entered my nasal cavity.

One was a bittersweet fragrance of an overripe fruit, while the other was a sour stench of iron rust.

*These are... the scent of the fruit that attracts kiba and the stench of blood.*

While I stood there in confusion, they walked by us.

The man in front was definitely Zashuma. I could see the familiar beard and his large mouth under his hood.

His cloak was covered in red bloodstains.

「... Oh, you are the owner of that stall.」

Zashuma suddenly stopped, looked our way, and said that.

The men behind followed his lead and looked at us absent-mindedly.

Zashuma had a grin on his face.

The other men were emitting bloodlust.

「Aside from the sexy ladies, you have hunters with you today too, huh. The residents of Genos must be freaking out at the sight of so many denizens of the Forest's Edge.」

「You are... Zashuma, right? May I ask what is going on here...? Didn't you set off for Semu?」

「We did plan to do that, but our cargo has been trampled, so we came back in disgrace! We can't do any business even if we head to Semu empty-handed.」

Zashuma laughed heartily after saying that.

He had a fierce and dangerous demeanor, like a bandit boss. His bloodied appearance and hearty laugh were in no way like a merchant at all.

Also, I could see a saber secured to his waist. Not just that, he showed no fear before the ten-odd denizens of Forest's Edge in front of him.

Seeing that I was confused, Zashuma continued cheerfully:

「This is the result of a justified self-defense in accordance with the laws of Genos! You might be denizens of Forest's Edge, but you are still under the jurisdiction of Genos, so don't think of doing anything funny now.」

「Justified self-defense...?」

「Can this be a coincidence? We encountered a unique denizen of Forest's Edge, and his appearance makes it impossible to mistake his identity. Help me confirm that. This might be the last time you can get to meet him.」

Zashuma snickered and then gestured to the men behind him with his chin. The men who were gathered together shifted to the middle of the procession, splitting into two groups in front and behind the Totos.

What I saw made me dumbfounded.

Three men stood behind the wagon.

One of them was Kamyua Yost.

He was wearing a hood, but I recognized his tall and slender build, hooked nose, and blonde beard covering his jaw.

The other man was Han of Dabag.

He wasn't wearing a cloak, and his head was covered in bandages, and rugged clothes enveloped his buff body. The two swords on his waist were clearly visible. His grey reptile-like cold eyes looked at us without any interest... interest towards our group from Forest's Edge.

One man stood between the two groups. He was all skin and bones and was wearing torn garments like a living corpse.

He was the former clan head of the Tsun clan, Zattsu Tsun. There was no mistake.

He looked terrible, his skin seemed to be covering his bones directly.

His head had the shape of a skull, his eyes and cheeks sunk in, and yellow teeth were visible through his dry lips. The top of his head that had just a few strands of black hair had deep wrinkles too. The color of his skin was dark purple, which made people doubt if he was still alive.

His limbs, neck, and body seemed shriveled like a withered branch. His wrists were chained to the back of the wagon. I could barely make out the swirly pattern on his torn garments.

He was tall, but his back and knees were bent, as if he lacked the strength to stand up straight. His frightening appearance was unpleasant, as if a corpse in a grave was standing right there.

「Is this man the felon from the Forest's Edge, Zattsu Tsun? He threw strange fruits at us and drew in a lot of kiba! Thanks to him, we suffered injuries and lost our cargo. Most of the Totos were gone too. We managed to capture him, there shouldn't be any laws in any kingdom that will turn a blind eye to such a grave crime!」

After listening to what Zashuma said, I finally realized the contents of the wagon being dragged by the Totos.

Lying inside the uncovered wagon were several bloodied men, some of them groaned painfully, while others were as still as a corpse.

There were six of them. Six out of the caravan's group of twenty-three.

The other men surrounded the felon and wagon quietly. Their cloaks were all dyed red, probably from the blood of kiba.

*Fruits that attracts kiba... I see, he attacked the caravan with those fruits...*

If they weren't lying, I could have a rough idea of what actually happened. The clue was the suffocating bittersweet smell in the air. Ai Fa could probably smell it too.

「The Sauti clan... What about the denizens of the Forest's Edge guiding you through the forest?」

I asked on reflex, and Zashuma laughed coldly.

「Ah, they were the first to engage and took the brunt of the attack. But there were too many kiba, so all four of them were heavily injured. We sent them back to their village. It ended terribly, but they are tough denizens of the Forest's Edge and will probably live.」

「What about Tay Tsun...? Did you only met one felon?」

「You mean that grey-haired old man? 《Double Fangs》 slashed him and knocked him off a cliff. He is probably Munto fodder now. Even if he survived, he will probably succumb to his injuries. From tomorrow onwards, we don't need to fear the felons of Forest's Edge anymore!」

「... Tay Tsun...?」

When that voice that sounded like an echo from hell came out, everyone grew tense.

Zattsu Tsun who was hanging his head low slowly raised it.

「... Where is Tay Tsun...? We have to reclaim the Tsun clan's lost glory... Tay Tsun...?」

「That surprised me. This walking corpse still has the strength to speak.」

Zashuma looked as if he was about to puke. He turned towards Zattsu Tsun with a stiff smile:

「Your comrade has died in the forest! Your life will end tonight too! Dream all you want before that happens!」

「... What are you saying, filthy resident of Rock City... Have you forgotten the debt you owe the denizens of Forest's Edge? You will soon suffer a terrible fate!」

His eyes were sunken deep like a real skull, and there were creepy black flames burning in them.

His dry skin splintered, and a malicious smile slowly appeared on his face.

「You are powerless to hunt kiba by yourself, why do you treat us with contempt...? You only disparage us for the sake of your own pride! Weak scions of Selva! Filthy residents of Rock City! You will be cursed!」

「Hmmp, why are you talking smack all of a sudden, felon? What about your attempts to rob the riches from Rock City? Do you have the rights to be so cocky? Despicable man!」

Zashuma's voice was loud and firm, but there was a hint of fear on his face. What spooked him wasn't the content of Zattsu Tsun's words, but the evil aura in his voice.

I felt the same way too. Zattsu Tsun showed incredible life force, and I couldn't feel that he was on the verge of death... Diga and Doddo were also filled with fear after witnessing Zattsu Tsun's monstrous obsession. And now we were witnessing the same thing with our own eyes too.

「Accursed residents of Rock City, say what you want... Your wealth is built on our blood and honor! You ingrates! Vicious usurpers! Our efforts protected your peace!」

「Enough! You are the one who is shameless and forgot about our honor!」

A steel-like voice broke Zattsu Tsun's cursing.

It was Ai Fa.

「You hogged the prize money, stole from the forest and neglected your duties as a hunter. You have no right to speak of the honor of Forest's Edge!」

「Oh... So you are that female hunter... I heard you are the fool who obtained enormous wealth by fawning over the residents of Rock City, that shameless house head...」

He slowly shifted his grudgeful gaze that was like hellfire towards Ai Fa.

Ai Fa was like a pissed-off cat. Her fiery blue eyes glared unhappily back at him.

「You have no rights to call me shameless! Former clan head of the Tsun clan, you chose the wrong path!」

「You are the one who chose wrongly... The residents of Rock City are all enemies! Unforgivable sinners! For their own peace and well-being, they trapped us in the prison called Forest's Edge! They are all filthy criminals!」

「The forest is our god! You call the forest your prison, you have no rights to call yourself a denizen of Forest's Edge!」

「Fool... The forest didn't bestow us with any grace, how can it be our god!? Our ancestors had been conned! We live in the forest, but we will starve to death if we don't earn copper plates, how is that a life of a hunter! The glory of the denizens of Forest's Edge had already been shattered four score years ago! It had already been trampled! You are just risking your lives to hunt copper plates in the form of kiba!」

Ai Fa gritted her teeth.

Before she opened her tightly closed lips to shout, Ludo Wu took half a step forward.

「What are you rambling about all this time? No matter how you try to hide it, you have committed a crime! You have disgraced the honor of Forest's Edge!」

「No... I'm taking back our honor... Zuro couldn't inherit my will after all... If not for my illness, the denizens of Forest's Edge would have seized back our glory! And we wouldn't need to swoon and submit to anyone, and could enjoy the fruits of the Forest's Edge, and live on in Forest's Edge in the way we should live!」

「Are you stupid? Is attacking travelers and robbing them the way the denizens of Forest's Edge should act?」

「Even if we commit any felony, those from the Genos castle won't punish us! Ten years ago, they also pretended that nothing happened! They can't hunt kiba, so they won't dare to punish the denizens of Forest's Edge!」

His words pierced through my heart like a stroke of lightning.

Ten years ago, he really... Zattsu Tsun really committed the same crime.

His plan succeeded that time.

He lured in the kiba and killed the entire caravan, and seized their cargo— but no one persecuted him, so he could smile so confidently now.

「If we save up a little bit more power, we can be liberated! You lots wasted all that effort! The Fa house! The Wu clan! If not for your meddling, the Tsun clan would have walked Forest's Edge down the right path!」

The next instant a sheathed blade swung down onto Zattsu Tsun's back.

Zattsu Tsun groaned like a beast and collapsed onto the stone-paved road.

Han of Dabag was the one who hit him.

「Criminal scum.」

After saying that through his bandaged mouth, he raised his sheathed blade again. But Kamyua Yost blocked it quietly.

「We might have apprehended the felon, but we don't have the authority to sentence him. Han, don't waste all the effort we went through to accomplish this.」

Han looked at Kamyua Yost with his cold reptile-like eyes and tied his sword back to his waist nonchalantly.

Kamyua Yost sighed in relief and then looked at Zashuma who has turned completely silent.

「Zashuma, there's no point in talking anymore. This man had lost his senses after being tormented by his terminal disease. We should hand this troublesome fellow to Genos castle quickly.」

「Ah, yeah... right.」 : Zashuma glared down at Zattsu Tsun and advanced northwards.

「I know you can stand. If you don't, I will slice off the meat from your knees.」

Threatened by Kamyua Yost, Zattsu Tsun slowly got up.

He then laughed maniacally like a demon.

「Filthy residents of Rock City, shameless fraud hunters who have betrayed the Tsun clan! Bask in your hatred for each other and head towards destruction! Only inevitable strife and despair awaits you! I curse the western god Selva! I hope for the downfall of the southern god Jaguar! We will not worship the wrong god again!」

The men spread out around him gathered again to conceal him, and when his hoarse laughter faded away, only silence that was like chaotic miasma remained.

With Zashuma leading the way, the procession of cloaked men followed slowly. At this moment, Kamyua Yost turned and looked our way.

He removed his hood, and didn't have his usual fake smile, and looked a little apologetic... He then showed us a lonely smile, as if begging for our forgiveness.

「... And now, the Tsun clan is finally finished.」

Ludo Wu said softly with a shrug.

When I was about to look at Ludo Wu and the others, I was surprised and stood in place.

The people standing along the streets were looking at us with strange gazes.

The peculiar gazes were filled with extreme fear, rage, and doubt, as if they were observing an unfamiliar beast.

Zashuma's group had already disappeared on the other end of the road, but no else had left. Everyone just stood in place and stared at us. They seemed to be afraid that they would be cut down if they turned their back on us... Everyone was frozen on the spot.

At this moment, someone tapped my left shoulder. I almost jumped from fright.

I turned around and found Milano Mast standing there.

Speaking of which, we were standing right in front of the 《Kimyusu's Tail Inn》.

「M-Milano Mast...」

「Stop talking. Hurry up and go.」

Milano Mast's eyes were burning with agitation like the other pedestrians.

No, the fire in his eyes was more intense than the others and raging with hatred.

「I will settle the carts; take your things and go... If not, I don't know what will happen.」

「But...」

「Don't be mistaken, my impression towards you all remains unchanged.」

Milano Mast said that as he watched with hatred at that man disappearing into the north.



「... He killed my friend.」

I could barely make out what he was muttering under his breath, but that was what he said.

At this moment, I finally realized that Leito was standing beside him.

The boy smiled quietly.

He stared at the north with his usual innocent smile.

I couldn't guess what he was thinking... But I did see tears slipping down the smooth ivory cheeks of the boy.

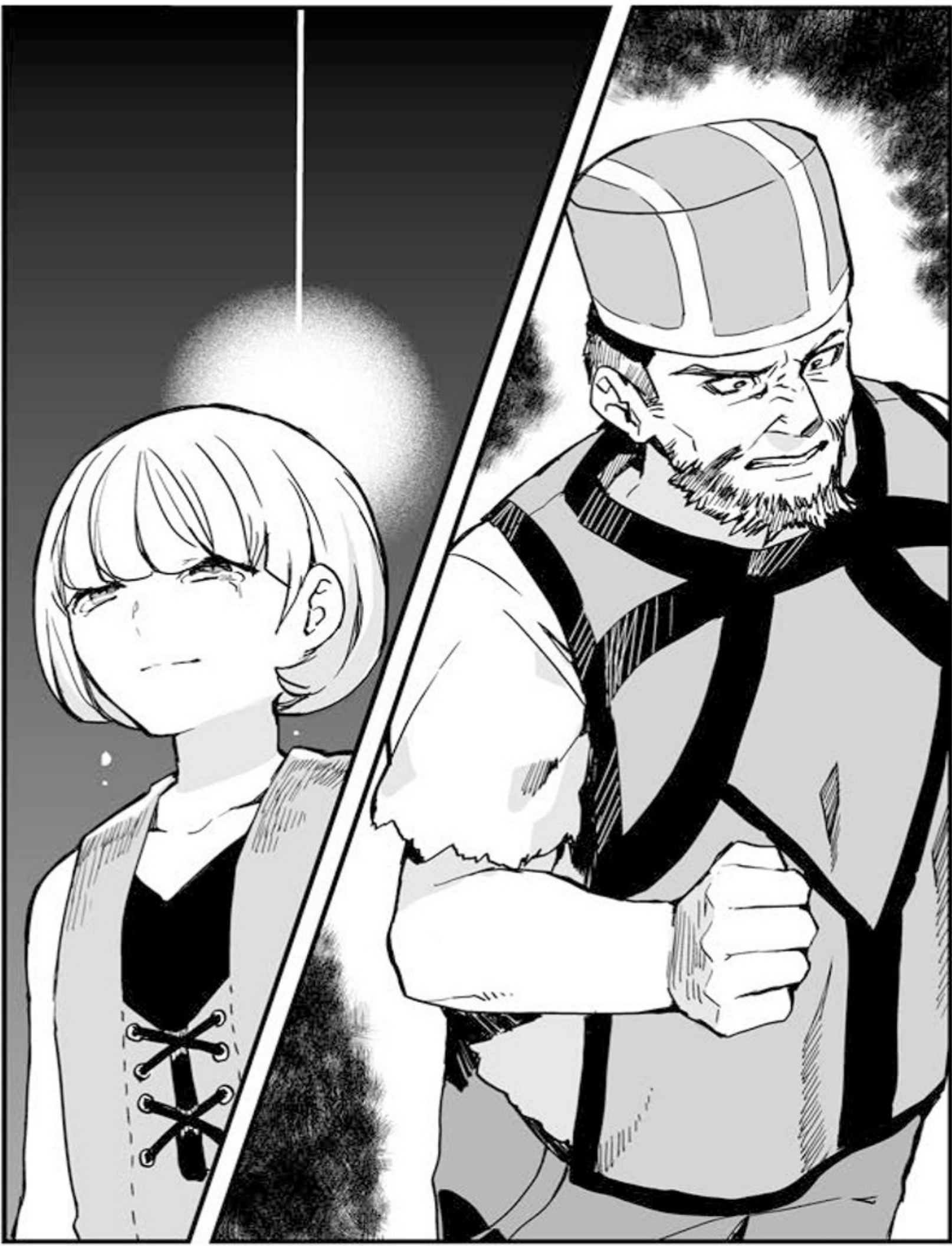
A few hours later, we received news of Zattsu Tsun's death.

Donda Wu who went into the Genos castle as the representative of the three tribal chiefs brought back this piece of news to Forest's Edge.

Zattsu Tsun was locked into the prison in Genos and died because of his frail health before his interrogation could begin in the night.

True to the divination of the Semu astrologist, the malefic star disappeared without a trace.

He left the world unhesitatingly, as if he was mocking the twisted fates of those he had left behind.



## Part 3

「... Dali Sauti's group that led the caravan into the Forest's Edge was heavily injured, but, fortunately, everyone survived. Two of them had serious injuries and won't be able to enter the forest for now.」

After dinner, we stayed in the Wu clan village to listen to Kaslan Lutim's report.

The threat of the vicious criminals disappeared suddenly. But we couldn't celebrate yet. To obtain more information, Ai Fa and I went to the Wu clan village instead of going home.

「I'm not sure of the actual amount, but they were attacked by more than ten kiba. Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun probably lured the kiba by drenching themselves with the sap of the fruit that attracts kiba and leading them near the caravan... They then threw the fruits at the caravan, shifting the attention of the kiba to it.」

The content of the report was as I expected.

They used the basics of the 『Sacrificial Hunting Method』 and lured over ten kiba by using their own bodies as bait... They were mad.

「Four hunters against ten-odd kiba, it was hopeless. It's a miracle that everyone survived.」

Kaslan Lutim nodded gravely in response to Ludo Wu.

「However, Dali Sauti still bears regrets for not defeating Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun. According to the messenger from the Sauti clan, he will come personally to apologize once he recovers.」

「There's no need for that. Never mind, it might not be so troublesome if that bony former Tsun clan head just dies in the forest.」

There were eight people in the hall.

They were me, Ai Fa, Kaslan Lutim, Ludo Wu, Donda Wu and Jiza Wu, as well as Grandma Jiba and Mama Mia Lei.

Grandma Jiba had grown frail, so it was rare seeing her here. But when she heard news of Zattsu Tsun's death, she insisted on participating in this heavy meeting.

「The biggest problem is that Tay Tsun is still at large. What has Dali Sauti got to say about that?」

Jiza Wu asked Kaslan Lutim in the stead of his silent clan head.

「Yes. Dali Sauti did see the man with bandaged face slashing Tay Tsun. After taking a vicious cut to the chest, Tay Tsun grabbed that man's cloak and got kicked off the cliff.」

「Yes, but since we didn't see his corpse, it's safer to assume that he is still alive. After all, someone on the verge of death could still commit arson and harm the women. In the end, we still need to stay on high alert.」

After saying that, Jiza Wu turned his slit-like eyes towards me and Ai Fa.

「Asuta, are you planning to enter the Post Station Town tomorrow too?」

「Yes, I'm more or less done with the ingredients. Genos castle also wants us to carry on with our business... However, I think we should be extra cautious from tomorrow onwards.」

Zattsu Tsun's existence made the residents of the Post Station Town fear the denizens of Forest's Edge even more. That unforgivable criminal had the gulls to accuse Rock City of setting him up.

I couldn't refute what the man that resembled a malefic star said. Eight decades ago, when Genos castle first started interacting with Forest's Edge, they probably did so with deceit and twisted attitudes.

However, Zattsu Tsun shouldn't be the one to say this. The denizens of Forest's Edge who had been suffering all the while should be the ones to resolve this problem.

In addition to robbing travelers, this felon committed murder and arson. Hearing him reveal the crimes of Genos would only induce fear and anger. When the people of Post Station Town simmered in rage because of the felon's accusation, their fear towards Forest's Edge increased too.

They might have realized the discrimination they held towards the denizens of Forest's Edge all the while, and when they did so, their fear could only grow.

They would think that the denizens of Forest's Edge bore a grudge against them and were filled with complaints and dissatisfaction despite appearing calm on the surface.

But that wasn't true. It was unclear if this was a good thing, but the denizens of Forest's Edge had no interest towards the residents of Genos. They just pursued their own glory with a single-track mind and didn't even notice they received unfair treatment.

As the tribal chief needed to interact with the Genos castle, Zattsu Tsun's heart became filled with grudge. He got too caught up in his hatred and humiliation, and it was the main reason why this situation arose.

For eight decades the relationship between Genos and Forest's Edge was complicated. We wanted to sort out our differences slowly with time, but Zattsu Tsun opted to attack the other party with his stubborn views.

Going to the Post Station Town under the current circumstances would be more dangerous than before.

「Zattsu Tsun... chose the wrong path...」

Grandma Jiba suddenly muttered.

Ludo Wu and Jiza Wu wanted to speak, but they remained quiet.

「Zattsu Tsun probably thinks that he can salvage the glory of our tribe by doing this... He thinks we have to break our bonds with Genos that spanned over eighty years, and we should live on freely...」

「Hmm? But he stole from the forest and neglected the important job of hunting. Won't that render the honor of the hunter worthless?」

「If the number of kiba increases, the residents of Genos would be troubled, but that's not true for the denizens of Forest's Edge... So if everyone in Forest's Edge lives just like the Tsun clan, the kiba might destroy all the farmland in Genos...」

「I see. He wants Genos to learn the importance of our tribe. Zattsu Tsun is really shameless and unforgivable... Never mind, even if he continued being the tribal chief, the denizens of Forest's Edge won't obey his commands.」

Jiza Wu said it matter-of-factly and seemed uninterested. His words were filled with confidence, showing his resolve to disobey such an order, even if it would lead to violence.

Maybe Zattsu Tsun was planning to gradually spread his obsession across Forest's Edge... After the Tsun clan, he could target the Tsun clan kins like the Zaza and Dom, then the minor houses, before finally moving on to the opposing forces like the Wu and their kins.

He would then tell Genos: 「We will not hunt unless our demands are satisfied」. Then with the safety of the farmlands as bargaining chips, he would negotiate for better terms.

If Zattsu Tsun didn't fall ill and continued holding the position of tribal chief, how far would his influence spread? This wasn't a laughing matter.

「I think so too, Jiza... But Genos' way of doing things isn't right either... Eating the fruits of the forest and living in the woods... That's how we lived back in the dark jungles of the south... Zattsu Tsun thinks we should go back to such a lifestyle...」

「Grandma Jiba, are you defending that stinky bag of bones? Are you saying that his thinking is correct?」

Ludo Wu frowned and seemed uneasy.

Grandma Jiba's eyes were half-covered by her thick drooping eyelids. She swept her gaze across all those present.

「I would like to ask... what are your thoughts after hearing Zattsu Tsun's words...?」

Donda Wu sat in the seat of honor beside the grand elder and answered after taking a swig of fruit wine:

「Like what the head of the Zaza house said, if he was unhappy with the way Genos did things, he could just leave the Morga Forest's Edge. Instead, he hogged the prize money and robbed travelers, that is not the way of a hunter.」

「... I concur with the house head.」

「That's right, I think the same way too.」

Jiza Wu answered, and Ludo Wu nodded in agreement.

Kaslan Lutim replied after thinking for a moment:

「But the Morga forest is his second home, abandoning this place isn't a simple matter. He might be branded as a traitor to the western kingdom and be persecuted. They might not allow us to change our god of worship for the second time... If that is the case, I think he should have sought out the correct path in the Morga Forest's Edge instead.」

「You are as straight-laced as usual... Asuta, Ai Fa, what about you?」

Ludo Wu asked, and Ai Fa tilted her head slightly.

「If we can't get along with Genos no matter what, we can only defeat them or leave Forest's Edge. However, I want to follow the rules set by Grandma Jiba and our other forebears as much as possible and live on in Forest's Edge.」

「I concur with Ai Fa. I don't really like the residents of Post Station Town, but I like living here.」

After Mama Mia Lei who was attending to Grandma Jiba expressed her opinion, Ludo Wu said in a slightly gauche manner:

「I don't want to leave Forest's Edge either. What about you, Asuta? Never mind, I can tell without even asking.」

「Yes, I feel the same way too... One additional point is that Zattsu Tsun chose the wrong method. His way of doing things can't lead the denizens of Forest's Edge forward.」

「Huh? Dad said the same thing.」

「That's right, and Zattsu Tsun even resorted to stealing from the forest. If he had the conviction to better the lives of the denizens of Forest's Edge, he should have explained it better. For someone like me who just arrived in Forest's Edge, I don't understand why anyone would rather starve to death if the only alternative is to eat the fruits in the forest.」

Someone glared at me from the right.

In other words, the heads of the Wu clan and Fa house were both glaring at me.

I changed my tone and said to Donda Wu:

「And of course, I can't accept Zattsu Tsun's words either. Not just because of his banditry, but because the branch house members of the Tsun clan didn't seem happy at all... Zattsu Tsun was probably a tribal chief that ruled through fear. He would demand others to do what he felt was right. No matter how good his intentions were in the beginning, he can't guide the people towards the right path if he resorts to such means... That's what I think.」

「You think Zattsu Tsun's opinion isn't wrong?」

Ai Fa asked with a troubled expression.

As I worried that her head could start to hurt, I shook my head.

「Even if the denizens of Forest's Edge are being discriminated unjustly, there is no justification for Zattsu Tsun to attack travelers. If he thinks the people in the city shouldn't be biased towards the denizens of Forest's Edge and that the denizens of Forest's Edge should live a freer life, he should have shared his thoughts during the house head conferences. He could then exchange views with others and seek out the right path. It is a pity that he didn't do that.」

「Pity... Such a pity...」

Grandma Jiba mumbled.

「Zattsu Tsun's father was an outstanding hunter... That's why when the previous tribal chief clans, the Ga-ze and Reamer, fell, the Wu clan let the Tsun clan take on the role of tribal chief. Even brutes like the Dom and Zaza were willing to submit to him. However, Zattsu Tsun inherited his father's pride and ambitious nature, but not his love for his fellow tribesmates... Such a pity... Such a pity...」

「... Grand Elder, we should focus on the present, not reflect on the past.」

Donda Wu mumbled and then looked towards Kaslan Lutim again.

「Is this everything the Sauti clan messenger said? If that is so, that means what Ludo and the others heard in the Post Station Town is true.」

「No, there is one more thing we can't ignore... Almost all the wagons pulled by the Totos fell off the cliff, but when a kiba trampled over a bag that fell from the wagon in front of Dali Sauti, the contents spilled out.」

「What, were there corpses in there?」

「No, the bags were filled with normal sand.」

Donda Wu frowned in surprise.

「No one would trade copper plates for sand, right? Could it be a type of food that looks like sand?」

「I asked the same thing. But when the kiba appeared, the caravan ditched the wagons and Totos and fought bravely with their blades drawn. They fended off the kiba, apprehended Zattsu Tsun, and then returned to the Post Station Town happily without any concern for their cargo that had fallen over the cliff... They probably didn't intend to head to the Eastern Kingdom in the first place.」

「... What is going on here?」

「I think they disguised themselves as merchants to bait Zattsu Tsun out... Kamyua Yost said there were 18 merchants and 5 escorts, but Dali Sauti couldn't tell which is which.」

「Hmmp~, so that's how it is. They could still walk just fine too, only five or six of them were groaning on the wagon bed. Those kiba inflicted serious injuries on the men from the Sauti clan, but the merchants from Rock City were tough enough to survive that attack. That is strange.」

Kaslan Lutim nodded when he heard Ludo Wu's analysis.

「But...」 : Jiza Wu started speaking:

「Didn't they spend two months to plan the expedition from the Forest's Edge settlement to the Eastern Kingdom? Even if it was a lie, we heard about this at least twenty days ago. The Tsun clan had not fallen then. The entire thing doesn't make sense.」

「Yes, we are stumped about this too. They probably came up with this plan immediately after learning that Zattsu Tsun is on the run. Since Kamyua Yost is a part of their gang, they should be able to do this easily.」

「No...」 : I said.

Saying this might result in Donda Wu getting angry at Kamyua Yost. But as a denizen of Forest's Edge, I had to speak up.

「Having them change such a grandiose plan so suddenly is very unlikely. I think their goal from the very start was to lure the Tsun clan into a trap, that would be more natural. The people in the Rock City probably had evidence that the caravan passing through Forest's Edge ten years ago had been sabotaged by a denizen of Forest's Edge.」

「... What exactly is going on?」

Kaslan Lutim looked at me with strong and quiet eyes.

*Is this really what happened...?* I withstood his gaze as the thoughts flashing across my mind left me gasping for air.



Right from the very start, Kamyua Yost already suspected that the Tsun clan was behind that incident a decade ago. I thought that him knowing that wouldn't affect the other matters. That was why I suppressed the dissonance in my mind. But I was wrong.

I didn't know there was a scheme hidden behind this.

Kamyua Yost and the others weren't simply on guard against the Tsun clan's attack, they were master baiters luring the Tsun clan to bite the bait.

I felt an indescribable sense of exhaustion as I continued:

「A common acquaintance of Kamyua Yost and me was related to that caravan. That acquaintance firmly believes that the criminal was from the Forest's Edge... I only learned today that the person who died is related to the caravan, but Kamyua Yost probably knew from the very start.」

I turned and looked at Donda Wu. He was silent, and a fire raged in his eyes.

「Do you still remember, Donda Wu? Twenty or so days ago, Kamyua Yost visited the Wu clan village and mentioned that caravan. He even stated his suspicion of the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

「... Brat, you think I will forget his insult against Forest's Edge?」

Jiza Wu also said:

「I still remember his words. Father Donda said that the caravan who attempted to cross the Forest's Edge was all wiped out, and Kamyua Yost remarked that it isn't clear if the murderers were the kiba.」

「Amazing, I can't remember something from that long ago.」

Ludo Wu shrugged.

I also forgot all that too. Even if I did remember, I couldn't have prevented what happened today... Despite this, I still hated myself for being so careless.

「The Tsun clan must have attacked the caravan in the same manner ten years ago. They would have succeeded this time too... if the caravan members were frail merchants.」

Unfortunately, the ones transporting the cargo weren't merchants, they were probably all experts in handling troublesome matters— 《Guardians》 .

And the cargo wasn't a merchandise to be peddled in Semu, but just ordinary sandbags. All this was done to lure the Tsun clan into this trap.

「Right now, only Zattsu Tsun and Tay Tsun of the Tsun clan could move freely. Normally, they wouldn't have the capability to attack the caravan. Hence, it would be too unnatural if they came

up with this plan all of a sudden to bait Zattsu Tsun. I think they have been planning this for two months and didn't expect the Tsun clan to lose their power in Forest's Edge.」

「I see...」 : Kaslan Lutim muttered, and the others fell silent. Kamyua Yost and his gang thought up such a complicated scheme to trick the Tsun clan, which was far beyond the expectations of the denizens of Forest's Edge.

「If the Tsun clan didn't spark off those troubles during the house head conference, they would still be the tribal chief clan. When the caravan requested for a job similar to that a decade ago, they would attack them again. Kamyua Yost's gang probably expected that, so they came up with this plan. When they learned that the denizens of Forest's Edge pulled the Tsun clan down from the position of tribal chief, they were probably shocked... But they couldn't just pretend that this plan didn't exist. Besides, the felon Zattsu Tsun might still attack the caravan at the risk of his life, so they decided to proceed with the plan.」

「But who is the mastermind behind this plan? The landlord of Genos allowed the Tsun clan to do whatever they wanted, so why would he suddenly swing down the sword of justice?」

Kaslan Lutim asked in an urgent voice, and I shook my head.

「I don't know the details... But I don't think Kamyua planned such a grandiose trap by himself. He had to make the request to the Tsun clan through the Genos castle. If the Genos castle was not in the know, that means he had deceived the landlord of Genos. Therefore, I think the landlord also helped with this plan.」

Did the landlord of Genos come up with this plan and task Kamyua Yost with its execution?

Or did Kamyua Yost plan all this, and the landlord of Genos aided him?

No matter what, the landlord of Genos was definitely involved.

「... So this is the way the Genos castle do things.」

At this moment... a raging flame burned in Donda Wu's eyes.

「In order to apprehend the vicious criminals of the Tsun clan, the people from Rock City deceived us? If they told us this from the very start, the men from the Sauti clan wouldn't have suffered serious injuries.」

「That... would be hard to tell. Kamyua Yost only asked Dali Sauti to be a guide, and Dali Sauti's group engaged the kiba on his own judgment.」

Kaslan Lutim answered calmly, and Donda Wu looked at him with feral eyes.

「The men of Sauti thought they were powerless merchants, that's why they drew their blades and took on the kiba. If they knew these people were like soldiers of Rock City, they would have

acted differently... And when the Sauti clan suggested escorting the caravan with all the men in their clan, they were turned down.」

「... That's true.」

「In their bid to lure out Tay Tsun, the Genos castle still didn't let the Fa house stop doing business... Everything they said is lies. How can we trust those fellows who won't reveal their true intentions?」

A fruit wine bottle shattered in Donda Wu's hand.

The few remaining drops of red liquid drenched his fingers and the rug.

「Donda Wu... No, head of the Wu clan and tribal chief of Forest's Edge, please don't be rash. Your actions as the tribal chief will decide the fate of Forest's Edge.」

「You don't need to tell me that. The ones leading our people are Graff Zaza, Dali Sauti, and me. Genos castle ordered us to guide a right path for the people in eight days.」

Donda Wu's emotions were as heightened as that night during the house head conference.

「Donda Wu, may I say something? I don't agree with the methods employed by the people from the castle, but there is one other thing... You said that Kamyua insulted Forest's Edge? What are your views on that right now?」

Donda Wu shifted his blue burning eyes swiftly from Kaslan Lutim to me.

I gulped, steadied my breathing and continued.

「What Kamyua said twenty-odd days ago was the truth. Not only that, he even taunted the denizens of Forest's Edge... No, he was warning us. That if we carried on like this, he might bring the Tsun clan to justice before we could... But when you heard his words, you thought that the denizens of Forest's Edge would never commit such banditry and felt you were being insulted, correct?」

「... What of it?」

「But the one who betrayed your trust and harmed the honor of Forest's Edge is Zattsu Tsun, not Kamyua, right?」

「Asuta, are you still covering for that man at this juncture?」

Jiza Wu's tone was as calm as Kaslan Lutim's, but there was a different implication in it. That made me break out in cold sweat.

But even so, I still had to continue:

「I don't intend to cover for Kamyua. However, we didn't notice the grave sins of Zattsu Tsun and had just let him be. This means the denizens of Forest's Edge and the people in the castle both have to take responsibility for his crimes.」

「... Are you saying that we are just as bad as the castle people? 」

「That's not what I mean. But we need to reflect on whose mistake resulted in the situation today... During that incident ten years ago, Zattsu Tsun harmed neither the denizens of Forest's Edge nor the people of Genos castle; instead, the residents of the Post Station Town were victims. Do you think all the blame should rest on the people in Genos castle? 」

*Who cares about the residents of Post Station Town!* ... If he answered that way, it might destroy my impression towards the denizens of Forest's Edge.

However, Jiza Wu merely shook his head lightly and said:

「We never brought the Tsun clan to task because we didn't have evidence of their crimes. The people in Genos castle had the evidence but refused to act on it. Please don't lump us together.」

「Yes, that's why...」

「I know. We didn't bring the Tsun clan to task, resulting in the corruption of the tribal chief clan, and that is our sin... Clan head Donda said that before. But I still want to tell this: I don't trust the people in Genos castle.」

Jiza Wu looked at his father with his narrow eyes after saying that.

Donda Wu had been glaring at me all the while.

「... I understand what you are saying and will take it into consideration when deciding the path we should take.」

Donda Wu kept quiet after that comment, and silence engulfed the hall.

Finally... Grandma Jiba's sorrowful voice echoed out:

「... If we had formed deeper bonds with Genos from the very beginning, this wouldn't have happened...」

The next instant, Ai Fa shouted angrily:

「You are wrong! Grandma Jiba, we are only here because our forebears carved out an arduous path! And paving a way through the difficulties we are facing is the responsibility of the denizens of Forest's Edge who are here today! ... Grandma Jiba, you are still here suffering alongside us, you are also a denizen in the present. You should stop wallowing in sorrow.」

「... You are right... Instead of sighing, we have more important things to do...」

A warm smile appeared on Grandma Jiba's wrinkled face.

「Ai Fa, thank you... I was almost caught up in my memories of the past again...」

Ai Fa averted her face while still looking angry.

As she had turned her face my way, our eyes met.

「... What are you looking at?」

「I'm looking at my house head.」

In the dimly lit hall, Ai Fa hit my head as she blushed.

And so, the emergency meeting that carried on until deep into the night ended.

## Part 4

Before heading back to the Fa house, we went to find Yamiel Lei and company who had been gathered in the Wu clan village.

More accurately speaking, Kaslan Lutim was the one who wanted to do that, and we are just accompanying him.

After passing through the plaza where a bonfire burned, we reached the empty house we lodged in in the past. The young house head of the Wu clan branch house was on sentry duty.

「I wish to speak with the people inside. Donda Wu has granted permission.」

After Kaslan Lutim explained himself, Shin Wu nodded and knocked.

「This is Shin Wu, guests from the Lutim house and Fa house wish to meet you. If you agree to that, open the door.」

The other party seemed to be hesitating. A short moment later, the door was pulled open from the inside.

Yamiel Lei poked her head out, and an intense smell of herbs assaulted my nasal cavity the moment she appeared.

「What business do you have with us...? Did you find Tay Tsun's body?」

「No, we are here to ask you about the Tsun clan main house.」

Yamiel Lei sighed softly and then quickly backed away.

We entered the house one by one, and Shin Wu who stayed outside by himself closed the door.

「Oh, so it's the lot of you.」

A nostalgic high-pitched voice echoed in the darkness. The members of the Tsun clan main house had been assigned to their new families, but they got gathered here once again.

Yamiel Lei became a member of the Lei house, Aura and Zwei joined the Lutim house, while Mida was now a part of the Wu clan.

「Excuse me for intruding on you so late. I just want to chat with you a little, I promise I won't stay long.」

As Kaslan Lutim and Ai Fa took off their leather shoes, I observed the Tsun clan members whom I had not seen for a few days.

Aura and Zwei sat near the wall to the right, clinging close together. After receiving us, Yamiel Lei walked sexily to the left wall and sat down. Mida who was like a small hill made out of flesh sat heavily near the wall opposite to us.

「What is it now? We already told you everything... Besides, the former clan head is dead, there's no need to worry about anything.」

Zwei was younger than she looked with her hair tied up high like an onion. Her voice had a higher pitch than a bird chirping. Compared to the last time I met her, she seemed more melancholic.

The others were the same. Aura clung on to her daughter's thin shoulders with her eyes closed. Yamiel Lei leaned lazily against the wall. As for Mida— I still couldn't figure out what this weird guy was thinking, but he was staring at us with his beady eyes.

「Zattsu Tsun might be dead, but we don't know where Tay Tsun is. I want to ask you about what kind of person he is.」

Kaslan Lutim walked to a spot where he could see all three sides and sat down. Ai Fa and I sat down behind his dependable back.

「I already said, we told you everything! Grandpa Tay spent too much time with the former clan head, now he is just a bum who can't think for himself! He will follow any orders and will do nothing if left alone. He is just like a mud doll!」

Zwei clamored hysterically.

Tay Tsun and Zattsu Tsun were both her grandfathers, and their blood flowed equally in her veins. Both of them fled from the Forest's Edge settlement as vicious criminals. If blood relations were very important to her, her feelings had to be complicated.

「Zwei is right... Father Tay served as the aide of the former clan head since his youth, attending to his every need. His soul got corrupted faster than anyone's else. Therefore, he won't act out of line unless a member of the Tsun clan main house orders him to...」

Aura, Zwei's mother and wife of the clan head Zuro said in a monotonous voice. Her eyes used to be murky like her father's, but they were filled with sorrow like a normal person now, as she stared into the empty mug.

「I don't doubt your words. If Zattsu Tsun gave him an order when he was still alive, how will things turn out? Even if Zattsu Tsun passes on, will he still carry out that order?」

「I don't know... Maybe he will disregard that order if he knows that the former clan head is dead. But don't worry about that... Is father Tay dead?」

「We don't know. We didn't find his body, so we are assuming that he survived.」

Kaslan Lutim must be restraining himself during his questioning. He didn't fault them for using the term 「grandpa」 or 「father」 even though they were no longer part of the Tsun clan.

Even though their relations were nominally severed, Tay Tsun was still their family by blood, that remained an irrefutable fact. My heart felt heavy when I looked at Aura and Zwei who were closely related to him.

At this moment, Mida suddenly yelled slowly: 「Ahh, you are that man who can cook yummy food... And you are the woman who scolded Mida... Why are you here...?」

I almost fell onto the floor.

My beloved house head sat cross-legged with one leg propped up and looked at Mida relaxedly.

「You just realized, huh, you are really slow... But it's great that you are still the same.」

「Yes... Why are you here...? Mida feels hungry when I see you...」

He was probably referring to me. That reflex wasn't anything to be happy about.

「We are asking about Tay Tsun... Mida, what kind of person do you think Tay Tsun is?」

「Mida... likes Tay Tsun... Mida likes Yamiel, Aura, and Zwei, and then Tay Tsun...」

「Shut up, stupid!」 : Zwei yelled again.

「So... Mida is happy to see Yamiel, Aura, and Zwei, but if Tay Tsun is dead, Mida will be sad... Where is Tay Tsun...?」

「Hey, don't cry.」

Ai Fa said in a sharp voice, and Mida, whose entire body was about to shiver, stopped immediately.

「Mida won't cry... So don't scold Mida...」

「I won't scold you if you don't cry.」

Ai Fa answered with a stern face, and Yamiel Lei who had been silent all the while let out a pretentious smile.

「Head of the Fa house, Ai Fa, you can already get Mida to listen to you, huh. Can you talk to animals too?」

「You treat your former brother like an animal? I advise you to stop with your barbed words... Anyway, why do you smell so strongly of herbs? My nose is starting to hurt.」

「Can you complain to the men beside you? Especially that buff boy from the Lutim house.」

Yamiel Lei shrugged off the question.

And of course, Kaslan Lutim replied puzzledly: 「What did I do?」

「It's because of your interesting father coercing the head of the Lei house. He said I have the stench of kiba blood on me, and I won't be able to marry if I don't remove that odor... Thanks to him, the head of the Lei house ordered me to scrub my body with the sap of lilo when bathing.」

Yamiel Lei flicked her brown hair that had been beautifully dreaded up and glared at me frostily.

「The head of the Lei house only urged me to do so after learning that Asuta also noticed the smell. Thanks to you, my nose is going bad... Asuta, do I really smell that bad?」

「Erm, yes, right... Because of the nature of my work, I'm very sensitive to smell.」

「... Hmmp.」

Yamiel Lei continued glaring at me while brushing her hair back. Ai Fa said unhappily as she looked at Yamiel Lei's arrogant eyes:

「Even though you got separated from the head of the Lei house, you still kept your promise faithfully. You are an unexpectedly obedient woman. Not only did you obtain the Lei family name, but also he is even looking out for you so you could marry in the future. Your clogged heart feels a little better, right?」

「You people are the ones that ordered me not to go against the Lei house. I'm just following the end of the deal; you have no rights to complain about me. Besides, I don't want a female hunter yammer at me about marriage.」

The atmosphere in the room was getting hostile.

And the reliable Kaslan Lutim mediated for them:

「Enough about that. Yamiel Lei, what are your thoughts on Tay Tsun? If he is still alive, what do you think his most likely course of action would be?」



「Only Tay Tsun himself would know... However, if you think he is just another man from the branch house, you will suffer for that.」

「What do you mean?」

「Tay Tsun isn't just the branch house member who spent the most time with the former clan head, he spent more time with him than any member of the main house. That corrupted his soul completely... Do you know why Tay Tsun often stayed beside Diga, me, and the others?」

We didn't know. Kaslan Lutim, Ai Fa, and I could only answer with silence.

Yamiel Lei let off the cruel air she had in the past faintly and curled her lips disinterestedly.

「Because the former clan head ordered him to do so. The clan head Zuro is lazy by nature, which disheartened the former clan head. In order to determine the best candidate to be the next clan head, he sent Tay Tsun to spy on us. Even though the former clan head commanded him to follow our orders, he was actually the eyes and ears of Zattsu Tsun and kept watch over us.」

「... That means that you could become the clan head, even though you are a woman.」

「Not 'could'. If the Tsun clan hadn't fallen into ruins, I would have definitely become the head of the Tsun clan. Nominally, the title would be given to the man I took in as my husband... Anyway, there is no question that Diga and Doddo lacked the caliber to lead the tribe, so Zattsu Tsun planned to insert my spouse as the tribal chief.」

This was the first time I heard of that, and it was a huge blow to me.

If Tsun clan headed in such a direction, what would the Forest's Edge be like? Zattsu Tsun who wanted to control the Tsun clan despite being bedridden, passing on the position of clan head to Yamiel Lei who sought the Tsun clan's ruin...

I shook my head and quickly dismissed such thoughts.

No matter how I thought about it, the future seemed to be dark. It would be fine if Zattsu Tsun left this world, but if he clung on to life like a vengeful spirit, Yamiel Lei would be burdened with heavy sins.

「Tay Tsun is an obedient servant. After Zattsu Tsun became bedridden, Tay Tsun worked for him like the extension of his hands... That's why, if Tay Tsun is still alive, don't come near me. Zattsu Tsun might have ordered him to let the Tsun clan lineage continue, and he would come to save me instead of Zuro or the eldest son Diga.」

「... This is the first time I learn how deep the relationship Tay Tsun had with Zattsu Tsun. It's also the first time I heard that you could become the next clan head.」

The corner of Yamiel Lei's lips raised even higher after hearing Kaslan Lutim's words.

「I didn't think there was a need to bring it up, so I didn't tell you. If that made you unhappy, you can punish me however you like. You can make me leave the Lei house and let the Jean or Dom houses who are raving mad from their recent humiliation take me in.」

「No, please wait, Kaslan Lutim...」

I quickly sound out to stop this.

I didn't think Yamiel Lei was doing this to save her own hide. She must have kept quiet for the sake of Tay Tsun. When Zattsu Tsun got executed, Tay Tsun's soul would be liberated.

Before I could continue, Kaslan Lutim stopped me with a look.

「I don't plan to fault you. Even if you had told us about this ahead of time, no one would have expected the deathly-ill Zattsu Tsun to escape by himself. Hence, the results would be the same. Besides, Zattsu Tsun was the one who chose you as his heir, so your crimes won't be any heavier.」

Yamiel Lei stopped her cold smile, and it was Kaslan Lutim who started smiling confidently.

「And you are already a member of the Lei house now. Rau Lei would not allow us to send you to the Dom and Jean house... Yamiel Lei, Zattsu Tsun has already passed on, it is about time you free yourself from his bondage.」

「... If I could forget that man so easily, I wouldn't be having such a hard time.」

Yamiel Lei said and lowered her head, covering her face with her long hair.

「Tay Tsun is the same... But if Zattsu Tsun didn't give any orders before he died, Tay Tsun could finally act on his own accord.」

「His own accord?」

「... He wishes for someone to destroy him.」

A heavy silence spread in the room.

Aura still looked at the floor sadly, and Zwei clung tightly to her as if she was trying to cheer Aura up. Mida still had a blank face as he looked at everyone else. Ai Fa was silent and had a serious expression.

Kaslan Lutim looked at Yamiel Lei's meek appearance. After a while, he slowly stood up:

「Sorry for intruding for so long... You will return to your respective homes in the near future. Before that, I seek your understanding to bear with this accommodation for now. Please live your life correctly as a denizen of the Forest's Edge in the future.」

No one answered him.

Ai Fa and I stood up together with him.

「Are you going...? Mida still doesn't know your name...?」

Mida suddenly spoke. Ai Fa who was about to turn and leave looked back in surprise.

「You can't even remember our faces, and you still want to know our names?」

「Mida doesn't know your name, so Mida can't remember your faces... Mida is Mida of the Wu clan...」

「We still remember you... I'm the head of the Fa house, Ai Fa.」

「I'm a member of the Fa house, Asuta.」

「Thank you... Mida hopes to see you again...」

「If fate wills it, we will meet again.」

Ai Fa's cape flicked in the air as she finally turned away.

Mida said timidly behind Ai Fa:

「Ai Fa...Asuta... If you find Tay Tsun, can you spare him...? He is a really gentle grandpa...」

After bidding farewell to Kaslan Lutim who was staying in the Wu clan village, we walked on a path while the Forest's Edge was shrouded in darkness.

We borrowed two candle stands filled with large quantities of animal fats and began my first trek in the night. After staying in the Fa house, I learned to be wary of Gizu and Munto at night but wasn't sure how should I do that.

「Asuta, don't leave my side. If you follow this rule, you won't meet any danger.」

Ai Fa sounded very tense.

We would be safe if we aren't careless. Conversely, it would be dangerous to let down our guard. Until the very last moment, Mama Mia Lei urged us to stay in the Wu clan village. But Ai Fa insisted on not doing that with the excuse of there being no empty houses.

Fortunately, I was less afraid of the dark compared to my fear of heights. I didn't show a miserable display like during my first time crossing the suspension bridge, but I was still a little scared.

There weren't any street lights in Forest's Edge, and the dense vegetation around us stopped the moonlight from shining through. If we lost the light on our candle stands, we wouldn't even see

our fingers in the darkness. If Ai Fa wasn't accompanying me, I wouldn't be able to stride forth fearlessly.

「... This is such an unusual day.」

Ai Fa muttered.

「Zattsu Tsun got arrested and passed away... Just this small matter was enough to make tonight feel as dangerous as the house head conference.」

「That's right. No matter what his performance during his reign was, he was still the tribal chief of Forest's Edge. Before he fell ill, he should be as ferocious as Donda Wu.」

In the end, that man cursed the world with all his energy and wished for the destruction of this world.

The death of the malefic star resulted in a chasm as deep as a black hole. To avoid being engulfed by this chasm, we had to fight with all our might.

「I wonder how the business would look like tomorrow.」

「Well~, we will only know after going to town. If we mess it up, all our efforts will be for naught. No matter what Genos castle orders us to do, we should stop if the situation is not conducive to business.」

「... Is this a trial given to us by the heavens?」

Ai Fa stared into the other end of the darkness as she asked:

「Because we didn't build a proper relationship with the residents of the Post Station Town... And we let the Tsun clan fall to their ruin, so we have to pass this trial?」

「Yes, I think you are right.」

As we chatted on and off, my fear of the dark slowly subsided.

But Ai Fa was still on edge. When we were about half an hour from the Fa house, she suddenly stopped and handed her candle stand to me.

She then gripped her hilt and faced to the left.

「Who's there, come out!」

What lay in the ambush wasn't Gizu or Munto, but a man.

I grew tense and shone my candlelight to the left.

There weren't many people who would try to ambush us. A man appeared from the darkness slowly like a phantom. And as expected, it was the grey-haired man from Forest's Edge.

「Tay Tsun...」

The next instant, the strong mixture of blood and fruits that attracted kiba assaulted my nasal cavity.

Tay Tsun stood between the trees. He was still alive.

I couldn't tell how serious his wounds were. He wasn't wearing a hunter's attire for some reason, and his body was covered with a cloak commonly found in the city.

He probably snatched that off Han of Dabag. I recalled Kaslan Lutim saying that Tay Tsun grabbed the cloak of that bandaged man before falling off the cliff.

No matter what, Tay Tsun was standing before us with a cloak on him. His hair and beard were grey, and his blue eyes that had a shade of black looked like a dead fish, and his aging face didn't show any expression... His right arm reached outside his cloak, and he was holding a steel knife.

「Hmmp... it seems that the former clan head Zattsu Tsun wants to kill the members of the Fa house instead of the Wu clan? Never mind, this will save me a trip into town.」

Ai Fa faced Tay Tsun with her eyes burning but calm expression.

「You are also a hunter, so this should be clear to you. You are not capable of harming us. If you still have any pride as a denizen of Forest's Edge left in you, put down your blade and let us arrest you.」

「I will put down my blade... But not now.」

His voice didn't have any emotions at all, just like how he sounded in the past.

Despite suffering an obviously mortal wound and falling off a cliff, he acted just like how he did in the past.

However... although there wasn't any trace of blood on the cloak Tay Tsun was wearing, I could sense a strong stench of blood on him. He probably was covered in blood under his cloak.

「Head of the Fa house Ai Fa, Fa house member Asuta, I'm not here to harm you. I have a request.」

「Request?」

「That's right. That's why I waited here for you. After seeing that only the men from the Dom house were in the Fa house, I came over to the Wu clan village. But there probably isn't much chance for us to meet in the Wu clan village. I'm really lucky to meet you here by chance.」

「I never knew you are such a talkative man. Looks like you have plenty of strength left in you.」

「Not at all. My life will end soon. Before that, I have a job to do.」

「Wait, I want to ask you something. You already know that the former clan head Zattsu Tsun is dead?」

Tay Tsun nodded like a puppet.

「I know. The men from the Dom house discussed this loudly. That's why I thought I should meet the two of you.」

「Hmmp, I get it. State your request then.」

Tay Tsun's reply was beyond my expectation.

「Asuta, can you let me eat your cooking?」

Tay Tsun said robotically in an icy tone.

「My cooking... W-Why do you want to eat it?」

「I heard your cooking brought prosperity to Forest's Edge and formed a proper bond between Forest's Edge and Genos. If your food can really achieve these two points, I hope to savor it before leaving this world.」

「But that's...」

「If you fulfill my request, I will put down my blade and submit to you. I swear to devote the time I have left to my tribemates.」

That sounded like something a denizen of the Forest's Edge would say.

However, I couldn't feel any emotions from his voice.

His blue eyes became more murky, and his pale face was expressionless. It didn't change too much, but the eyes of the Tsun clan branch house members were starting to show emotions. But Tay Tsun remained the same.

「I had the chance to taste your cooking during the house head conference. But I was distracted during my meal and couldn't feel the full extent of your abilities... I want to confirm your prowess and ascertain that my actions are wrong before I can rest in peace.」

「... In that case, let's head back to the Wu clan village. The Wu clan are probably more approachable than the Dom house.」

Ai Fa answered quietly, and Tay Tsun shook his head.

「No, the head of the Wu clan won't spare me. If I forced my way, the relationship between the Fa and the Wu might go sour... Besides, I have already decided to die in Genos city.」

「What?」 : Ai Fa narrowed her eyes with a dangerous gleam.

Tay Tsun continued with the same attitude:

「I will visit your stall at high noon tomorrow. Asuta of the Fa house, please let me taste your cooking.」

「Don't be stupid! You are heavily injured, how can you get into the Post Station Town! Before you can even make it to Asuta, you will be arrested by the Forest's Edge men or the town guards!」

「It's fine, as long as I wear this cloak, I can move around the Post Station Town without stirring the suspicion of the guards.」

After saying that, Tay Tsun pulled up his hood.

The denizens of Forest's Edge were very proud, so I found it hard to imagine him disguising himself as a resident of the Post Station Town.

That wasn't the issue here.

「What are you scheming? We can't grant your suspicious request.」

Ai Fa grabbed her hilt tightly and lowered her stance.

Tay Tsun remained still.

「If you don't agree, then cut me down here. I will struggle until the very end as a member of Zattsu Tsun's clan.」

「Why are you so adamant about entering the Post Station Town!? The men from the Wu clan will also be there, that's the same thing as going back to the Wu clan village with us now!」

「No, I want to go to Genos' Post Station Town and be apprehended in front of the local residents. I want them to see the denizens of Forest's Edge bringing a fellow tribe mate to justice. That is the only way for me to atone for my sins.」

「... This is nonsense. I don't understand what you are saying.」

「The residents of the Post Station Town loathe the denizens of Forest's Edge. That's because of the numerous crimes committed by the Tsun clan. Since Zattsu Tsun is dead, I'm the only one who can atone for these crimes... Because I'm the last man to follow Zattsu Tsun's biddings and bring harm to Genos.」

Tay Tsun said without any emotions.

「After I eat the food and toss aside my blade, you can do whatever you want to me. You can cut me down or turn me in to the guards. The important thing is that the denizens of Forest's Edge have to bring a fellow tribe mate to justice before the eyes of the residents of Rock City... I won't die so easily if the people in Rock City try to cut me down anyway.」

「Are you really sane? I can't believe your words.」

「I think so too. I'm probably proposing this to regain my sanity.」

Ai Fa's sharp gaze and Tay Tsun's blank stare clashed together in the dark.

I was worried that Ai Fa's blade might slash at the other party and said:

「I'm sorry, but we can't accept your request. We don't know if we can open the stall tomorrow, and even if we did, the men from the Wu clan will be there with us. We value the bonds with the Wu clan and won't deceive them. Even if we tried, they will definitely identify you.」

「It's fine if the men from the Wu clan want to cut me down. If they did so before the eyes of the residents, it will certainly be of help to Forest's Edge... However, if they attack me before I can ascertain your prowess, I can only resist bitterly to the end as a member of the Tsun clan.」

「No matter what you are thinking, you will only stoke the fear in the residents in the Post Station Town if you create trouble at the stall.」

「Yes. The most ideal situation is for the denizens of Forest's Edge apprehend me and hand me over to the guards. This is the only way to appease the hearts of the residents.」

I had the feeling that Tay Tsun was trying to deceive us.

Just like Ai Fa, I couldn't believe him either.

「... I have said my piece, it's up to you to decide now.」

「I see... Seems like I should arrest you right now.」

Ai Fa lowered her stance even more.

Tay Tsun nodded emotionlessly.

「Well then, I can only put up a tough resistance... But I can't defeat you, so I will flee.」

「You already lost your strength, you think you can escape me?」

「I probably can't flee from you. But only if you ditch your family behind.」

Tay Tsun's figure slowly moved further away.

「Wait! Don't move!」

「No, I have to flee. If I succeed, I will go to the Post Station Town at high noon. Please defeat me there.」

Tay Tsun's figure was already gone from the luminance of the candlelight.



Ai Fa wanted to stomp the ground with all her might and chase him. But she just glared at me vexingly.

「Damn it, what's with that man!」

In the end, Ai Fa didn't leave my side, and Tay Tsun went missing once again.

# Chapter 4 - Commotion in the Post Station Town

## Part 1

「Ai Fa, don't be so worked up.」

The next day, when we were heading to the Post Station Town, Ludo Wu said that to Ai Fa.

「You can't just leave Asuta and play tag with Tay Tsun. If Asuta gets bitten by a Gizu and becomes sick and bedridden, he won't be able to cook. He might even die of the infection, which will be way worse.」

Similar to yesterday, there were eight of us, four stall attendants and four escorts, heading to the Post Station Town.

As we traveled down the gentle slope, Ai Fa looked peeved and remained quiet.

「Dad and Jiza-nii didn't complain either. They just told me to apprehend Tay Tsun when he shows up. It's useless for him to use the fruits that attract kiba in the Post Station Town, and we can win easily with our numbers.」

And of course, we told everything that happened last night to our fellow tribe mates of Forest's Edge. The men from the Dom house even searched the forest in the night, but couldn't find any traces of Tay Tsun.

「Anyway, don't worry about it. We will catch him and won't let him harm the women of Forest's Edge or hurt the residents of Post Station Town. He is alone, there is nothing to fear.」

Ludo Wu who was leading the way continued in a relaxed tone:

「If he tosses his blade aside obediently, we will let him taste Asuta's cooking. He shouldn't have any complaints then. I won't care even if he wants to grumble anyway... Ai Fa, stop being so depressed.」

「... I'm not depressed.」

Ai Fa couldn't bear it anymore and pouted.

The next instant, Rau Lei who was on the other end flanking the women reacted:

「What's with your face? So you make such an expression too, you look just like a kid.」

Ai Fa immediately showed her cat-like face and looked at Rau Lei with dangerous eyes.

「All these expressions suit you just fine. On a closer look, you really are a beauty. If you weren't a hunter, I would want to marry you.」

「Stop that, Rau Lei. You go too wild sometimes.」

I interjected frantically, but Rau Lei just tilted his head quizzingly.

「But why? The Lei house doesn't have the custom of being too formal with friends. I said that because I really thought about marrying her.」

「But...」

「Don't worry, I can't marry a hunter. As the clan head, I have to leave behind many scions. If she wants to marry into my house, she will have to give up hunting.」

「Ai Fa didn't say she wants to marry you anyway!」

Ludo Wu retorted with a smile, and the subject was dropped. Despite the dangerous situation, the men of Forest's Edge still took it easy. Could I put down the load in my heart after seeing their casual attitude? To be honest, I felt uneasy about this since last night.

*That man... just what kind of person is Tay Tsun?*

After losing his family, this branch house member of the Tsun clan moved into the Tsun clan main house.

He was Aura's father and Zwei's grandfather.

He served under Yamiel Lei, Diga and the others, obeyed their orders, and took care of menial chores.

And... he was the aide of the former clan head Zattsu Tsun.

I have reviewed his case file numerous times but still couldn't get a grip on his character.

Only two things helped me analyze his personality. The first, he 「might」 have disobeyed Diga's orders and saved Ai Fa. The second, he put down his blade without hesitation before Dan Lutim.

*... He wants someone to destroy him.*

Yamiel Lei's words echoed in my mind.

Yamiel Lei felt the same way in the past.

Even so, she still chose to live on as a member of the Lei house. If Tay Tsun could ignore Zattsu Tsun, he might have forged a new life as a member of the Dom house.

But he preferred to follow Zattsu Tsun and left. Diga and Doddo fled, but Tay Tsun stayed with Zattsu Tsun. He then assisted Zattsu Tsun in committing his final crime.

Was this part of his plan to seek destruction? Did Tay Tsun choose this path, so he could witness Zattsu Tsun's end and follow him? Was that it?

「... Halt.」

Rau Lei suddenly raised his hand and stopped the group.

The paths at the edge of the forest were filled with greenery, and these narrow paths were made to link the Post Station Town to the Forest's Edge settlement.

These dirt paths were just two to three meters wide and meandered greatly. Dense and short trees flanked the path. Visibility was poor because of the thick vegetation. But we would be able to hear the noise of the Post Station Town if we proceed a little farther.

「What's the matter? I don't sense any movements.」

「The woods beside us are quiet... But isn't the city noisier than usual?」

I couldn't hear anything. Vena Wu and the other women also tilted their head confusedly.

The hunters nodded.

「Now that you mention it, this sounds like a large group of people quarreling.」

「Did Tay Tsun fail to hide himself and get caught?」

「I will go take a look.」

The rear guard Shin Wu ran down the path. He sprinted back less than a minute later.

「A large number of Post Station Town residents are gathered at the borders of the city and the forest. Also, I noticed plenty of guards, but they showed no intentions of coming up.」

「How many are there?」

「More than ten guards and about a hundred residents.」

Just what was happening here?

The most probable situation would be Tay Tsun getting arrested, and the crowd was here just to see the show.

「We won't be able to enter the town like this. What should we do, Asuta?」

「Hmm... Why don't Ai Fa and I go take a look? If it is just the two of us, it won't agitate those residents.」

Besides, if Tay Tsun really got arrested, we had to talk to him before he gets brought into Genos castle.

「That's true. If things look bad, run back here immediately. We can then just relax and wait for them to disperse.」

「Understood.」

Ai Fa nodded.

We walked down the path Shin Wu took earlier.

After walking down the meandering road for 30 seconds, we saw the scene described by Shin Wu. As we were on higher ground, we could see the entire place.

A row of wooden houses appeared before us, and there was an empty space behind it. More than a hundred people were gathered there, and they had blockaded the end of this road.

Speaking of which, when Zattsu Tsun was on the run, two guards started standing sentry here. Their numbers had now increased to ten.

And... several Post Station Town residents were obviously arguing with the guards.

「... Looks like they haven't caught Tay Tsun.」

「Yes. Could it be that we are the reason behind this commotion? 」

That could be possible.

Since this had nothing to do with Tay Tsun, we had to think about it from this angle.

「What should we do. It's not a good time for us to enter the town, right? 」

「But we still don't understand the situation, we can't turn back so easily. Whether we enter the town or not, Tay Tsun will be there as promised. 」

There was a stern light in Ai Fa's eyes.

「We should speak to the guards. If they want us to go back to the settlement, there's nothing we can do either. No matter what, we have to figure out what is going on before deciding the next step... But if that crowd attacks us, we will go back to the settlement right away. 」

「Understood.」

And so, Ai Fa and I watched both sides of the road as we cautiously moved forth.

When the vegetation got less dense and they were able to see us, the chattering turned into angry shouts.

「Uwaahhh...」 The noise came like a flood.

Ai Fa stopped for a while, but when she saw the guards armed with spears forming a human wall and that the people from town showed no intention of charging us, she walked forward again.

As we got nearer, I gradually made sense of their shouts.

I could only understand two of their sentences. Some roared: 「Get lost! 」, and others shouted: 「Don't go back! 」

「Listen up, stop that noise! Inciting a disorder in the city is a serious crime! Do you want to be exiled from Genos! 」

I could finally make out what the guards were shouting.

「Stop joking with me! If you think you can exile us, give it a try! 」

「The salary of you, guards, is paid by us too! 」

「If you are guards, arrest the criminals! 」

「Who are the criminals!? The criminals already got caught yesterday! 」

A large horde tried to squeeze in front of the guards. There were also residents who stayed behind and were pushing against each other.

The pushing ones were mostly westerners and southerners. The westerners with ivory or yellowish-brown skin and the southerners with snow-white skin were all red in the face, and they grabbed onto each other's chest and yelled. Those two weren't the only ones at odds, some westerners were also glaring at each other.

The tall and slender dark-skinned easterners surrounded them, standing quietly in place. Their numbers were substantial too.

Some of the westerners argued with the easterners, but the easterners didn't raise their voice or get physical with the other party, and just replied in a normal voice.

「The denizens of Forest's Edge hate the people of Genos! We can't let those dangerous people enter Genos! 」

「Don't talk nonsense! They didn't commit any crimes! 」

「That's right! Do the citizens of the west like to slander innocent people!? 」

「Shut up! Outsiders can just shut their trap! 」

「If you have a problem with this, get out of Genos! 」

「Hah! You want to bar us from Genos? Then what is the reason for the existence of this Post Station Town!? If you hate foreigners so much, just build a wall! 」

We stopped about 7 to 8 meters away from them.

Their emotions were boiling in this cool and refreshing morning.

「All the denizens of Forest's Edge are our enemies! 」

「Are you retarded? Are you going to hunt the kiba!?」

「You are from Genos too, why are you defending them!?」

「The denizens of Forest's Edge are citizens of Genos too! We are all children of the western god Selva! Those who slander them are the unforgivable traitors!」

「Stop being so rowdy! Leave right now! Or I will arrest you all!」

「Go ahead and try!」

We didn't need to ask what was going on. The faction supporting Forest's Edge and the faction against Forest's Edge were arguing nonstop.

All the southerners supported Forest's Edge. Most of the westerners were against Forest's Edge. However, there was a group of westerners who opposed this.

And it seemed that the crowd was growing with each passing second. The people who heard this uproar from the streets and buildings started walking over.

This commotion was getting out of hand.

I stood there in a daze, and Ai Fa had a sour face.

Should we proclaim our innocence?

Or should we turn back quietly?

No matter what we did, there was a risk that the commotion would intensify.

「... Asuta and his friends did nothing wrong! Why are you chasing them away!」

I heard the familiar voice of a girl between the shouts. That was Yumi. But I couldn't see her.

「Enough already, let us eat our breakfast! I'm starving!」

Pops Balan shouted.

Shumimaru was probably watching this scuffle sadly with his hood pulled up.

... *What should I do?*

Normally, the best option would be to return to the Forest's Edge settlement.

The Genos people were forcing us to continue with our business, but if we did so under such circumstances, the relationship between the Post Station Town and us would fracture. We should retreat for now and then find a good chance to talk to the people in Genos castle in the future.

But if we didn't make any explanation and just fled, the people supporting us would be outraged. What should we do...

「Enough already! What rights do you have to obstruct other people's business!？」

At this moment... we heard this exceptionally loud roar that drowned out the other shouts.

That voice didn't quiet everyone, but the first row of people right in the guards face all piped down and turned back.

「What did the denizens of Forest's Edge ever do to you!? Only those who had been harmed have the rights to complain! Everyone else can just shut up!」

「What are you saying!? Didn't they attack the caravan yesterday?」

「They are not the assailants! The culprit has been apprehended! What else are you unhappy about!？」

Milano Mast was standing up for us.

He came out from the crowd, turned his back towards us, glared at the crowd, and roared even more loudly:

「Does the crime of one person mean the sin of an entire country!? You think there are no felons in Genos!? Are you ready to put your heads on the line for the crimes of someone else!?」

「Traitor! Those trying to shield the denizens of Forest's Edge should get out of Genos!」

「I'm not shielding anyone! I'm just lecturing the idiots who are trying to punish innocent people!」

「... Ai Fa, let's go.」

I grabbed Ai Fa's hand.

「We can't let Milano Mast get targeted by the crowd. We will convince them.」

「I don't plan to convince them.」

「Then just protect me. Maybe there will be people trying to beat me up.」

「... I will do that then.」

Ai Fa smiled fearlessly.

「Silence!」

When Ai Fa and I were about to go down the slope, a thunderous voice sliced through the heated air.

The roar was incredibly loud, and the hundred-odd people all held their breaths in surprise.



Donda Wu and Dan Lutim could probably do that. But the one who appeared before us was definitely from the Rock City.

Everyone started chattering again, but the atmosphere was completely different. The gathered crowd also parted like the Red sea in the ten commandments. Roughly ten soldiers walked slowly through this path towards us.

These soldiers were obviously on a different level from the Post Station Town guards. Their leather armor was white and elegant; they had a sheathed blade on their waist and held spears in their hands.

I had never seen anyone dressed so pompously in the Post Station Town before. They were also wearing steel helmets that covered their nose and cheeks. Their light armor had the emblem of the western kingdom on it, a short ceremonial cape and vambrace that covered their entire forearms. Some of them had leather helmets, but the joints were reinforced with steel. Their sword sheaths and boots were also decorated beautifully, and elegant warriors were an apt description for them.

The one in the middle of the group walked slowly to the front of the guards. He was exceptionally tall amongst the white and buff soldiers.

He must be the leader of the group. He had a steel helmet decorated with a plum that was like the crown of a cock. He was the only one wearing a long cape, not holding a spear, and having two swords tied to his waist. The button on his cape had a yellow stone that looked like amber. His white leather armor was adorned with elegant accessories.

「Guard captain, what is this commotion about?」

The man asked in a cold and stern voice. From the sound of his voice, the one who roared just now was him.

One of the guards blockading the road to the Forest's Edge panicked and hurried over to him.

「L-Lord Malfreed<sup>3</sup>... Aren't you the commander of the castle guards? What brings you here?」

「... Guard captain, I am the one who is asking the questions.」

When he heard that, the slightly plump guard captain started shivering.

「T-The residents of the Post Station Town became fearful of the denizens of Forest's Edge after that episode yesterday. This commotion happened when they saw that the denizens of Forest's Edge were on their way to enter the town.」

While they were conversing, the residents all fell silent.

In this strangely empty space between the bustling city and the untamed forest, this group dressed in white didn't belong to either side. They were most suited for the Rock City.

I didn't know about the existence of the castle guards. But they were probably the true citizens of Rock City— the residents living inside the walled castle town of Genos.

「... An announcement was made two days ago, stating that the denizens of Forest's Edge won't be barred from conducting their business in the Post Station Town. I don't recall this announcement being canceled.」

The man known as Malfreed looked at Ai Fa and me.

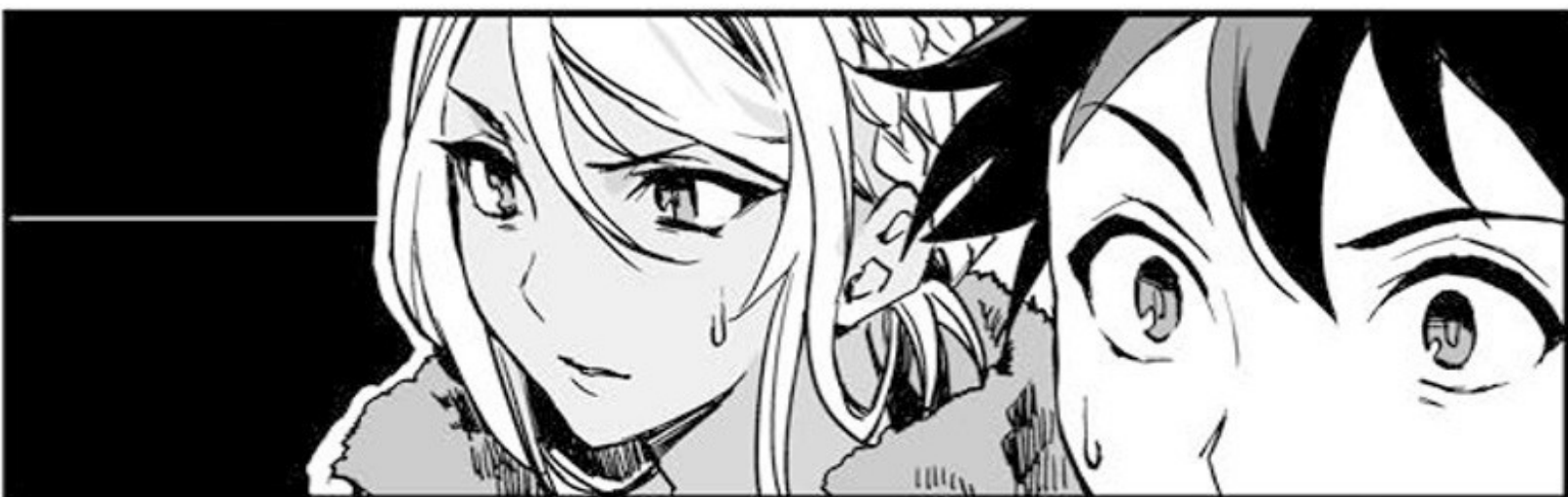
As he was wearing a large helmet, I couldn't make out his face clearly.

However, it was enough for me to realize one thing.

I glanced at Ai Fa beside me, and she frowned unhappily.

As expected... so that was the truth.

I was clenching my fists before I realized it.



Malfreed faced the guard captain again, seemingly losing his interest in us.

「So, what crimes have they transgressed?」

「N-No, they just came from Forest's Edge and had not spoken a word.」

「In that case, the residents of the Post Station Town who started this riot are the criminals. Aren't you in charge of upholding the peace here? Why are you leaving the criminals be?」

「B-But there are too many...」

「This has nothing to do with numbers, a crime is a crime.」

The next instant, the man in white armor brandished one of his swords.

The residents from the Post Station Town screamed and backed away.

「You criminals who disturb the peace in Genos, do not resist arrest. Those who do will be executed in the name of the castle guard commander Malfreed.」

How reckless.

I grabbed Ai Fa's arm and covered the 7 to 8 meters distance in one shot.

「Please wait! Did they commit such serious crimes? From what I could see, no one had resorted violence, right!?」

「Y-You denizens of the Forest's Edge, watch your tongue! This is the firstborn of Marquis Marstein Genos, commander of the castle guards Lord Malfreed!」

The guard captain yammered with a green face.

Marquis Marstein Genos' firstborn... So he was the eldest son of the Genos Landlord?

Even so, I didn't want to just submit to this humiliation. Milano Mast was standing beside the man with his sword drawn, and there was a rebellious fire in his eyes, as if he was about to lash out.

「This commotion only happened because we appeared before them suddenly! We should have entered the town when everyone has cooled down! That's why they were so agitated, so please spare them!」

「... No matter what reasons there are, a crime is a crime. Besides, we didn't prohibit you from entering the Post Station Town.」

Malfreed said quietly without even looking at me.

I looked at his cold profile as I desperately continued:

「I can understand it is a crime to incite a commotion in the Post Station Town. But in that case, we should bring the subject who caused this situation to arise in the first place.」

「The subject who caused this situation?」

「Yes, it's a merchant named Zashuma, the leader of a caravan. He paraded the fearsome criminal through the Post Station Town arrogantly. Because he let the residents see that criminal who was on the verge of mental collapse, the residents felt that their peaceful lives were at risk.」

This might sound like I was grasping at straws to others.

But I didn't care. I just wanted the subject himself to hear what I had to say. This commotion is because you neglected to care for the citizens— that was what I was implying.

「... What a cunning man.」

Malfreed sheathed his sword.

The guard captain looked surprised, but he still roared at the residents of the Post Station Town in a panic:

「Disperse right now! If you don't, I will arrest you all!」

They might have looked unhappy, but everyone still walked slowly back to the Post Station Town.

Malfreed turned his entire body to face us.

「Denizens of Forest's Edge, a crime is a crime, and a criminal is a criminal. In Genos, be it the denizens of Forest's Edge or the residents of the Post Station Town, everyone needs to abide by the law of Genos.」

「... I think you are absolutely right.」

Malfreed looked younger than I thought and was 25 years old at most. As expected of a noble, he had a strong chin, high bridge nose, and good looks.

He had ivory skin and light-brown fringe that could be seen from his helmet...

There was an icy gleam in his eyes, like that of a reptile.

## Part 2

Our opening hours had been delayed greatly, but we still decided to open for business.

If not for the matter related to Tay Tsun, we would have definitely turned back. We should allow some time for the residents of Genos to cool down after all.

Hence, we had to apprehend Tay Tsun quickly. This was for the peace of mind of the people in Forest's Edge and the Post Station Town... Other than that, we also wanted to calm Tay Tsun down.

Tay Tsun was probably looking forward to his destruction. But I didn't wish for him to do so. If he managed to avoid the death sentence, he might get another chance at life.

If he continued to run, his grave wounds won't heal and he would die in the forest. No matter how minute the chance, as long as there was hope, I didn't want him to give up. This might sound hypocritical, but I really meant it.

「The westerners are cowards! I really hate them so much! Even a newborn Kimyusu is braver than them!」

Pops Balan chewed on his 『Myam-roasted meat』 angrily.

「Don't be like that, Pops.」

It was rare seeing Arudas eat a 『Kiba burger』, and his voice sounded meek.

「Starting a commotion will only trouble Asuta. You can clearly see that from that incident earlier. Now that I think about it, I should have ignored those noisy westerners.」

「What are you talking about!? Who will take responsibility if I can't eat a delicious lunch!? Arudas, you were shouting louder than me today too.」

「That's why I'm reflecting on my actions. Why are we so easily angered?」

Arudas looked dejected, unlike his usual self.

「In the end, we still got to eat delicious dishes, so there wasn't any need to quarrel in the first place. If the people from Rock City were there from the start, it wouldn't have gotten out of hand.」

「That's right! Normally, the people from Rock City are more timid and lazy than the Post Station Town residents, but I could give them some praises for today.」

That was how forthright the southerner's thinking was.

However, doing things this way was similar to how the Genos castle protected the Tsun clan. I didn't know why the people in Rock City agreed to us doing business, but the people in the Post Station Town probably viewed it as 「the denizens of Forest's Edge receive special treatment」.

「Hey, you will be providing dinner at the inn tonight, right?」

Pops stared at me.

「Yes, Naudiz hopes that I can continue,」 I answered.

「Alright then, I have no complaints... Asuta, no matter what troubles lie ahead, you can always count on the people from the south.」

「Yes, thank you.」

Of course, I couldn't ask them for favors so easily, but I was still happy to hear such kind words.

When Pops' entourage just left, the members of the 《Silver Vase》 came over.

「Asuta, happy, see you safe.」

Shumimaru seemed to be deep in thought.

I asked Shela Wu to prepare the 『Myam-roasted meat』 and accepted the copper plates.

「Thank you, Shumimaru. Were you there just now too?」

「Yes, but helpless, we.」

「No, this is a problem between Forest's Edge and Genos, we have to resolve this ourselves.」

「... Asuta, I think, denizens of Forest's Edge, east kingdom, suit.」

「Eh?」

「West kingdom, no appreciate, denizens of Forest's Edge. Strange, not appreciate, brethren.」

「... The denizens of Forest's Edge don't think of the people of Genos as brethrens too. I don't think this is a one-sided issue.」

After my reply, Shumimaru drooped his eyes weakly.

「I, incomplete, thinking. Shameful.」

「N-No, not at all! I'm very glad that you are worried about us. I really mean it.」

However, we can't migrate to the eastern kingdom so easily. Like what Kaslan Lutim explained, if we gave up hunting kiba and left the western kingdom, we might really become their enemies. Even someone from another world like me understood how dangerous that would be.

「... Malefic star, gone. No telling, peace or downfall, future. I worry.」

「That's right. We will do everything we can to steer our fate towards a better outcome.」

「... If peace, please, innkeeper 《Cryptic Venerable Inn》, discuss.」

After Shumimaru, there were only a few other customers.

There was less than an hour before noon. The crowd was getting denser, but everyone was avoiding us. The westerners who supported Forest's Edge also cautiously kept their distance. Maybe they were afraid that they would trigger a commotion similar to this morning.

「Asuta, sorry to keep you waiting.」

At this moment, Rii Sudora arrived.

It would be bad if she came at the same time as Tay Tsun, so I asked her to come earlier and will pay her an extra red copper plate for today.

The head of the Sudora house accompanied his wife over as usual, his gloomy eyes staring at the road.

「Somehow, the air feels really chaotic today, and the gazes from the town residents irk me too.」

「Zattsu Tsun just got caught yesterday. It will be wise not to agitate them.」

「Hmmp, you don't need to tell me that, I don't care about them. They are just cowards.」

I was a little saddened by his words. Some of the houses were friendly towards us and concurred with the Fa house's business in the Post Station Town, but they had very shallow understanding of the residents of Genos.

If they could peddle kiba meat in the future, they could live a more prosperous life. That was why they concurred with me doing everything I could. However, they didn't realize that they and the residents of Genos needed to understand each other first.

The members of the Wu clan probably didn't realize that either. The denizens of Forest's Edge still maintained their attitude of 「It's fine whether you like or hate us.」

As they lived with honor, they didn't fear the eyes of others and didn't care how others viewed them. They would just head down the path they believed in... That was the most prominent characteristic of the denizens of Forest's Edge. It was their greatest strength, as well as their biggest flaw.

I thought the simple and righteous attitude that the denizens of Forest's Edge held towards life was precious. However, when they saw something different from themselves, they didn't interact with them actively and rejected them like something filthy. This might be the reason that led to the Tsun clan's downfall and the souring of relations between the Forest's Edge and Genos.

That was why I felt surprised when Donda Wu proposed that everyone should redeem the crimes of the Tsun clan, instead of cutting them off. I thought that was a gospel that heralded the dawn of a new era.

*To think that another commotion happened right after the Tsun clan fell into ruin. If Zattsu Tsun didn't run away... Forget it, it's useless to think about that.*

As I was troubling over that, the Sudora house had sorted out their deployment. Rii Sudora and the youngest man stayed at the stall, while the other three hid into the woods. Their actions were



similar to the past two days, but they had already discussed how they should encircle Tay Tsun were he to appear.

All the preparations were done now. No matter when Tay Tsun appeared, we would be able to react immediately.

I was worried about the residents of the Post Station Town. The crowd was sparse, but it was still much denser than the morning. Furthermore, compared to the 5 or 6 guards on duty, there were only two sentries here at the northern end of the town today.

It would be better for us if there were fewer guards, but what about the pedestrians? When Tay Tsun, the felon of Forest's Edge, would approach us disguised as a patron and get apprehended by his fellow denizens of the Forest's Edge, what would the passersby who witnessed this scene think?

Would they assume that the denizens of Forest's Edge were stirring up more trouble and feel more animosity? Would the violent action of the hunters frighten them?

Was doing this the right thing? I couldn't tell if that was true.

「... Asuta.」

At this moment, Ai Fa called out to me softly.

I turned, and Ai Fa who was standing between the two stalls looked to the north.

I followed her gaze and held my breath in surprise. The group in white we saw this morning was coming our way from the north.

The north... where the Genos castle was located.

*What's going on, didn't they return to the castle?*

It was a squad of about ten men dressed in white, just like this morning. The commander Malfreed stood at their fore as usual. They walked solemnly on the stone-paved road and entered the Post Station Town once again.

After acknowledging the salute from the guards at the northern end of the city, they didn't even look at us and headed to the bustling south. Malfreed's grey eyes looked straight ahead and didn't glance towards us.

「Are they on guard against Tay Tsun?」

Ai Fa let a young member of the Sudora house take her post and then whispered to me.

「It is rare seeing the people from Rock City loitering in the Post Station Town. Looks like things are going to get troublesome.」

「That's right, it would be bad if they run into Tay Tsun.」

If that man with reptile-like eyes encountered Tay Tsun, he would cut him down even though they were inside the Post Station Town. Because he failed to cut that criminal down yesterday.

「... That man feels similar to the eldest son of the Wu clan.」

「Hmm? Do you think he is similar to Jiza Wu?」

「Don't you think so? I could see his steel-like conviction that the rules are everything.」

「Hmm~, in comparison, Jiza Wu is more approachable.」

If Jiza Wu opened his slit-like eyes wide, there might be cold eyes hidden there too... Just the thought of that made me shiver.

The firstborn of the Genos landlord and the commander of the castle guards, Malfreed...

He was known as 《Double Fangs》, Han of Dabag.

The noble of nobles disguised himself as a 《Guardian》 by covering his face with a dirty cloth. It was not funny as a joke at all.

I was probably right. His buff body, two swords, and ivory skin... Ai Fa and I also heard Han of Dabag saying 「criminal scum」 to Zattsu Tsun.

There were also those cold, grey, reptile-like eyes of his. I didn't know what others thought, but in this Post Station Town, there couldn't be another pair of eyes like that.

*To think that even the son of the landlord is working with Kamyua... No, is it the opposite? Maybe it's Malfreed who came up with the plan, and Kamyua is helping him... No matter which it is, this is unexpected.*

Anyway, this proved that Kamyua Yost didn't set the caravan trap alone and the people of Rock City were involved.

Where was that willful conman Kamyua Yost, and what was he doing right now?

*The denizens of Forest's Edge are in a perilous situation, one false move and our relationship with Genos would fall out beyond repair. Is that Kamyua Yost's true goal? Or he didn't expect for the situation to turn out like this?*

Would I have the chance to speak with that man who was always pretending to be retarded?

I didn't hate him, I just wasn't able to trust him, so I could only keep my distance away from him.

However, if Kamyua Yost was lying about his admiration for the denizens of Forest's Edge, there was no other way then being enemies.

*But... If not for the trap set by Kamyua and the others, Milano Mast and Leito won't get their justice...*

I felt my head getting heavier as I thought about it more and more.

I hoped that Kamyua Yost sided with the 「Post Station Town」 and not with 「Rock City」. Even if we were on opposing sides, I hoped that I wouldn't need to hate him.

「Asuta, there are just three 『Kiba burgers』 left, what should we do...?」

Vena Wu asked in her usual tone.

「Three left, huh, that's unexpectedly fast. It's almost noon, let's make another batch.」

I asked Shela Wu and Rii Sudora to tend to the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall and then walked to the 『Kiba burger』 stall.

At the same time, Ludo Wu came out from the woods behind me.

「Huh? Ludo Wu, why...」

「He's here.」

To everyone else, this was the only cue they needed.

Vena Wu and Lala Wu left the stall quietly and linked up with Shela Wu's group. The four Sudora men quickly encircled the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall and the women.

Ai Fa walked to the front of the 『Kiba burger』 stall and Ludo Wu stayed at my left. Rau Lei and Shin Wu walked even further to our left.

There were still tens of minutes before high noon.

*But... Tay Tsun was here.*

Is that him...?

A well-built man in a brown hooded cloak approached us with a precise pacing like a robot. I couldn't see his face as he wore his hood low like a Semu. However, I could see his dark-brown chin that was visible under his hood.

His strides were steady, showing no signs of injuries. That was why he could come in through the bustling southern road without arousing any suspicion and stand before the 『Kiba burger』 stall.

He was less than two meters from Ai Fa. Rau Lei stood on the opposite end of Ai Fa, which was to Tay Tsun's right, while Shin Wu had flanked to Tay Tsun's back. I took two steps back, and Ludo Wu squeezed into the opening there.

Including Ludo Wu who was standing behind the stall, they surrounded Tay Tsun from all directions. All of them held knives in their hands and could stab him by taking another step forward.

Tay Tsun raised his head and looked at me through Ludo Wu's shoulder.

His eyes were murky like a dead fish.

「I'm a little early. There are fewer guards on sentry than I expected.」

「There are fewer guards, but the soldiers from Rock City are patrolling the town. They might come back any time soon.」

「I see... I don't have any copper plates, can I try your cooking?」

「On one condition.」

Ludo Wu answered.

「Hand me your blades. If you do that, I will let you try Asuta's cooking. I swear on the name of Ludo Wu, youngest son of the Wu clan main house.」

At this moment, a hysterical voice came from the north.

「Hey! What are you all doing since just now!? Don't do anything suspicious!」

It was one of the guards standing sentry in the north.

Ai Fa kept her eyes on Tay Tsun and answered loudly:

「This is the criminal wanted by you, a member of the Tsun clan! We will hand him over to you soon, so get ready!」

「H-He is the criminal!? Don't joke with me, that criminal got slashed in the chest, even if he lived, he won't be able to move!」

「I don't know either! But he is standing there right now! We want to take him alive and hand him over to Genos!」

「... I-I will get reinforcements! Don't run away!」

One of the guards sprinted down the southern road, the other guard stood in place, showing no intention of coming nearer.

The passersby all stopped in their tracks with fear and suspicion on their faces.

「What are you going to do? A large group of men will be coming soon. Choose your actions with the time you have left.」

After Ludo Wu said that, Tay Tsun slowly raised his arms.

Ai Fa, Rau Lei and Shin Wu watched him with hunter's eyes.

Tay Tsun undid the button at his neck, and the cloak fell onto the ground.

At this instant... I held my breath in surprise.

Tay Tsun was wearing the garments of Forest's Edge with beautiful swirly patterns. But there was a terrible cut from the right shoulder down to left side of his abdomen. He used Fuibaha vines to stitch up his large wound messily.

「... Your body is in a terrible state. How are you still standing?」

「I can't die yet.」

After saying that emotionlessly, he reached for the knife on his waist.

The gazes on Tay Tsun grew sharper. Tay Tsun tossed the sheathed knife near Ai Fa's feet, and Ai Fa swiftly kicked it to a man from the Sudora house.

Tay Tsun was unarmed now.

Ai Fa, Rau Lei, and Shin Wu took a step closer to Tay Tsun.

They didn't need to get any closer, they were in stabbing range.

「Can I try your food now?」

「... Alright.」

I confirmed with Ludo Wu and then moved in front of the stall.

I was just a meter away from Tay Tsun, with a pot between us. If Tay Tsun were to make any moves, the four hunters would draw their knives and attack him.

With a prayer in my heart that violence wouldn't be involved, I grabbed a piece of grilled poitan.

I piled the chopped tino and aria on top of that poitan, scooped up a meat patty and stacked it higher, poured a generous serving of tarapa sauce on it, and topped it off with another grilled poitan.

「It wasn't much.」

The 『Kiba burger』 was passed to Ludo Wu, who then handed it to Tay Tsun.

Tay Tsun didn't show any emotions and took a bite.

Did he understand what we were trying to do after he eats that burger?

Tay Tsun moved his mouth robotically and finished the 『Kiba burger』 quickly. During this time, the crowd gawking at us got bigger, but I still didn't see any signs of the town or castle guards.

「Are you satisfied now?」 Ludo Wu asked. Tay Tsun replied with his eyes closed:

「I'm very satisfied. It is delicious. I finally understand why Mida Tsun is so obsessed with your cooking and why the citizens of the west are willing to pay copper plates for this.」

「If you are done, put your arms behind your back. I will tie you up and hand you over to the guards.」

「I understand. But I have to apologize to Asuta of the Fa house. I told you last time that I wanted to try your dish in order to ascertain your prowess. That is a lie.」

「Huh?」

My heart started pumping quickly.

However, Tay Tsun's serious face broke into a gentle smile, with his eyes still closed.

「Actually, I just wanted to try your cooking one more time before I die. The dinner you prepared for the house head conference was very savory... I want to apologize for deceiving you and making you worried.」

「No, this isn't much...」

I wanted to reply.

But I couldn't do so.

As I was feeling a sigh of relief, the world suddenly changed.

I didn't know what was happening.

I heard Ai Fa shouting angrily: 「You felon!」, the sound of something breaking, a wail, a clash of metal, and other sorts of sound. All these noises happened simultaneously, things were happening... and when I realized it, I lost my freedom.

My vision went dark for a second, and when I recovered my vision, the scenery before me was completely different.

The one standing before me was no longer Tay Tsun with a calm and satisfied smile, but Ai Fa who was holding a knife. There were also Ludo Wu, Rau Lei, and Shin Wu. Everyone's eyes were filled with unrestrained rage.

An iron pot, which was probably mine, had fallen beside Ludo Wu's feet. The tarapa sauce was spilled all over the ground.

Behind the hunters were the residents of Post Station Town whose faces were twisted from fear.

Not just the westerners, there were also southerners and easterners. I even saw some of my regular patrons there. A tearful Tara was somewhere to the left of field of vision, and Uncle Dora was holding her small shoulders with a pale face.

I wanted to look at them, but I couldn't even turn my head. Someone was gripping my throat from behind.

The powerful fingers could snap my neck in an instant. The strength was controlled just right that I wouldn't suffocate.

And then... The voice of a man mad with rage exploded beside my ear.

「Unforgivable traitors! You brought ruin to the Tsun clan, I will give you my final vengeance!」

The hoarse voice was completely different from before, but this was definitely Tay Tsun's voice.

## Part 3

「How can this be, why aren't you dead!?」

Rau Lei roared in rage.

「My knife stabbed deep into your body! Are you really human?」

「Hmmp, I just ate some 『taboo leaves』. You lot don't care about the fruits and vegetables of the forest at all, so you won't understand what is happening.」

His hoarse voice was filled with mad glee.

Although he sounded like a completely different person, I could still tell that it was Tay Tsun.

He played us like a damn fiddle... He was a man prepared to die... No, the obsession of Tay Tsun who was dying had tricked us.

A stronger blood stench than yesterday entered my nasal cavity. I turned my eyes down and saw a nerve-wrecking pool of blood by my feet. There were four hunters here, they couldn't have failed. Tay Tsun had definitely suffered a mortal wound.

However, Tay Tsun's obsession exceeded common sense. He was leaning against a tree behind the stall, facing off against the four hunters. And he was clutching my throat from behind.

I didn't know what sort of fight happened or what was happening.

I was conscious the entire time, and things somehow turned out like this. Tay Tsun must have leaped over the stall and grabbed me like a beast... At the same time, the three hunters slashed his back.

Ludo Wu was in front of me earlier, just how did Tay Tsun get by him? I could only imagine. Seeing that Ludo Wu's knife lay broken in half on the ground and he was wielding a machete instead, I could guess what method Tay Tsun employed. When Tay Tsun jumped at me, he also flipped the pot in the stall to block Ludo Wu's attack. Now that I thought about it, there was a loud sound of metal clashing just now. That explained why Ludo Wu's knife was broken.

As I pondered with my half-numbed mind, Tay Tsun's voice that was filled with the madness of hatred rang out:

「How dare you vermins defy the tribal chief Tsun clan, I will not die before I have my revenge! This brat ruined the Tsun clan, I will take him with me to hell!」

「Stop your nonsense! Your people are the ones who violated the taboo of Forest's Edge and have no rights to call yourself the tribal chief clan! Unhand Asuta this instance, villain!」

Ludo Wu shouted back, he was as furious as Rau Lei.

Tay Tsun laughed demonically when he heard that, and it reminded me of Zattsu Tsun yesterday.

「This has nothing to do with the rules of Forest's Edge or the laws of Rock City! The great Zattsu Tsun was going to bring us a new world order! You fools couldn't understand his ambition! You can only swoon over the people of Rock City, the epitome of weakness! You made us lose the only means of making the people in Rock City submit to the Forest's Edge!」.

「I have had enough of your pointless ramblings! What new world order!? Your people are just a bunch of thieves!」

「Our goal is to seize back the wealth that was taken from us through unscrupulous means! We risked our lives to protect the farms of Genos, so we just want to take our fair share of the reward! The people of Genos imprisoned us in Forest's Edge and enjoyed all the benefits, they are the ones who are shameless!」

Was this really the voice of a man with a mortal wound? His imposing aura was on par with Donda Wu.

Furthermore, I could feel his enormous strength on my throat through his fingers. Tay Tsun didn't use his right arm and only grabbed my throat with his left hand. If I tried to resist, he would squeeze down on my windpipe in punishment. I was too useless to do anything and could just stand there dumbly and listen to their conversation.

「Shut up! Is this the reason why you are stealing? I would rather die than do something so shameless!」

「Then die! Get rammed to death by the kiba in the woods! If the meager copper plates you get by trading in the tusks and horns are enough to move you, then waste away in the forest! This is the fate that Genos had bestowed to the denizens of Forest's Edge!」



「Why you...!」

Ludo Wu's eyes were burning.

When I realized it, there were three other people surrounding us.

The three hunters were holding knives stained in blood. Rau Lei was enraged, Shin Wu remained expressionless, but their eyes were both burning fiercely. As for Ai Fa...

Amongst everyone present, Ai Fa's blue eyes were burning the brightest, and her expression was filled with sorrow.

That face of hers broke through my head and pulled me back to reality.

「P-Please wait, Tay Tsun... You really think Zattsu Tsun's thinking is correct...?」

He applied more force to my throat.

「What? Hearth caretaker of the Fa house, you don't want me to kill you? No matter what you say, I won't forgive your crimes! Because you and the Wu clan colluded to destroy the Tsun clan!」

「But...」

「Genos forced us to obey their unreasonable rules for eight decades! Do you know how many people starved to death in these eighty years!? Even so, we were still forbidden from eating the fruits of the forest and just kept on hunting kiba! Be it newborn babies, elderlies living out their lives in pain, or hunters wounded in their battle with the kiba, they are all the same... Even though no one was watching, we still followed this rule and starved to death! Genos is a murderer! I won't accept this as the fate that Forest's Edge deserves!」

「I think that's wrong too! That's why I started my business so that I could bring a prosperous life to Forest's Edge!」

I squeezed out a replied despite the pressure on my throat.

Tay Tsun laughed out loud.

「That is too stupid! There is plenty of food in the forest, so why do we need to go about it in a roundabout way!? If we harvest the resources of the forest, we won't even need copper plates! As the tribe that worships the forest as our god, this is the right way to live!」

「That will make the kiba destroy the farms of the west! Forest's Edge is also a part of the kingdom of the west, we have to support each other, that is the right path!」

「That's exactly why we need more strength! If no one starves to death, Forest's Edge will get stronger! If the 500 denizens of Forest's Edge increases to a 1,000, we can hunt more kiba. Then the kiba won't attack the farms of the west no matter how much resources we forage from the forest!」

My guess was right—I realized this once again.

The fundamentals of Zattsu Tsun's intention were the same as Ai Fa's, Kaslan Lutim's and mine.

He wanted the denizens of Forest's Edge to live a prosperous life.

「If that is so... Then why didn't you hunt kiba properly for the last decade? I can't accept you attacking travelers and stealing crops, but if the Tsun clan did their duties as hunters properly and explained to everyone in Forest's Edge the importance of gathering strength and accumulating wealth... and shared why it is necessary to forage from the forest, the tribe might agree with you all. After that, you can just communicate this to the Genos castle properly, and if we obtained the permission to harvest the resources of the forest, everyone will praise the greatness of the tribal chief Tsun clan!」

「Fools! Doing so will be submitting to Genos! We have to destroy the hypocritical life given to us by Genos!」

「Hey, shameless criminal, you have not answered Asuta's question. Why didn't the Tsun clan do their job as hunters properly?」

On hearing Rau Lei's query, Tay Tsun replied:

「Kin of the Wu clan, it's all because of your meddling. Two decades ago, your clan showed animosity towards the Tsun clan, so the Tsun clan needed a power that exceeds the Wu clan! Otherwise, the houses that fear the Wu clan won't submit to the Tsun clan. In order to protect the people and our wealth, we had to accumulate our power quietly!」

「... Nonsense. Your people didn't hunt properly, kept on committing theft, and spent the last decade leisurely. What did you get out of that? You only earned a few more lousy copper plates, but became lazy and lost your power and pride as hunters!」

「That's because of Zuro Tsun's incompetence, so he couldn't inherit the ambition of Zattsu Tsun! If Zattsu Tsun hadn't fallen ill, we would already be living correctly and getting the honor of doing so!」

「Your former clan head fell ill before realizing his ambition, and your current clan head is incompetent, so blame them. In the end, all this talk of ambition is just to do whatever you wish and live a life of depravity, correct?」

Rau Lei's ferocious face which was like that of a hunting dog looked a little surprised.

「Besides, you sound like you are making excuses for yourself. Other than you and Zattsu Tsun, no one else mentioned such lofty ambitions. So Zattsu Tsun had been keeping this to yourself, which must have been stifling.」

「You are right, in the past decade, everyone who knew about this ambition had died! Zuro Tsun, the only other person who knew about this, had also fallen from grace! The Tsun clan... is doomed!」

「In that case, you shouldn't bear a grudge towards the Fa house and Wu clan...」

Wails and shouts came from the crowd when Rau Lei was speaking in surprise midway.

A group of soldiers in white, the castle guard of Genos had arrived.

「Vicious criminal, so you still live. How dare you drag your filthy body into Genos, you deserve nothing short of death.」

The guard commander Malfreed stood at their fore, leading ten soldiers towards us with brisk strides.

Ai Fa blocked their path.

「Hold it! What are you trying to do!」

「Isn't that obvious? I'm going to execute the felon.」

「Fool! Can't you see that Asuta— my family has been captured by him!? If you approach him recklessly, he will harm Asuta!」

「Of course I can see that, denizen of Forest's Edge. Don't worry, I will cut off his head before the felon commits his crime.」

「How can you achieve that!? You underestimate the prowess of a hunter from Forest's Edge!」

Ai Fa raised her knife once again, with her back towards us.

An even colder gleam came out of Malfreed's reptile-like eyes.

「Denizen of Forest's Edge, do you intend to raise your blade against me? That's a serious transgression.」

「Stop kidding me! That man got slashed numerous times, and he is still laughing right there as if those are just scratches! What if he crushes Asuta's windpipe the very moment you lop off his head!?!」

Ludo Wu turned towards Malfreed too.

At this moment, Tay Tsun let loose a demonic laughter.

「Very good! Kill each other! That's the way it should be! Forest's Edge and Genos are fated to hate each other until one side is destroyed!」

「... Tay Tsun, don't get too cocky. What you are saying doesn't make sense. You are only making a scene to hide your fear because you can't accept the downfall of the Tsun clan, correct?」

Shin Wu warned him with a relatively calm voice.

Tay Tsun continued laughing.

「I have no fear in my heart! The fate of the Tsun clan is already sealed! I just want to bring this unforgivable traitor with me to my grave!」

「Even if you do that, your soul won't rest in peace. Let go of Asuta.」

「I will let him go! But only after he is dead!」

Malfreed pulled out his blade as he listened to Tay Tsun's laughter.

He didn't just draw one sword. He had a silvery white sword in each hand as he looked at Ai Fa coldly.

「Make way, or I will cut you down too.」

「... I don't wish to brandish my blade against anyone from the Genos castle. Please back off.」

Ai Fa's voice was shaking from emotions.

The two soldiers behind Malfreed gripped their spears tightly.

As the air was boiling...

A lackluster voice shattered the tense atmosphere.

「Don't do that, you two don't need to be at odds.」

It was a slender figure wearing a long cloak.

The man who suddenly appeared scratched his messy blonde hair.

「... This isn't the time for you to interfere, Kamyua Yost. Please leave.」

Malfreed answered while he stared at Ai Fa and Ludo Wu.

Kamyua Yost walked towards us and said in a calm voice:

「That's not true, Malfreed. You and Ai Fa are both my important friends. How can I stand by idly when you are brandishing blades against each other? Don't say something so sad.」

「Then take care of this denizen of the Forest's Edge. She has the obligation to obey the law.」

「That's true. But I owe a favor to the denizens of Forest's Edge. I lied to them, so I have to pay back this debt.」

After saying that, Kamyua Yost stood between Ai Fa and Malfreed.

From this position, he couldn't dodge no matter who slashed at him.

Kamyua Yost didn't move his hands out of his cloak. He turned his back towards Ai Fa and us and faced Malfreed.

「I followed your request last time, right? Then listen to my request this time... I think this issue should be resolved by the denizens of Forest's Edge.」

After several seconds of silence... Malfreed sheathed the sword in his left hand.

Kamyua Yost thanked him, then looked at Ai Fa behind him.

「Ai Fa, the rest is up to you. Save Asuta.」

Ai Fa turned silently and walked towards us.

「Tay Tsun, I know your heart is filled with regrets, but why are you taking Asuta down with you? It doesn't help you even if you did that... No, it will just make your family sad if you continue with your crimes.」

Ai Fa said quietly.

Tay Tsun said viciously:

「What family!? They had the Tsun family name, but they prostrated themselves to the Wu clan, so they are no kins of mine! Only Zattsu Tsun who died with regrets can call himself my brethren!」

「Is that how you really feel? Do you think your ambition is more important than your family?」

As she was saying that, Ai Fa did something strange. She opened her arms wide apart and gestured for Rau Lei and Shin Wu to back away.

After hesitating for half a second, they slowly retreated.

Ai Fa sheathed her knife, then took a few steps towards us.

「What are you doing? If you come any closer, I will crush your family member's throat... I am on my last legs, no matter what you do, it won't change the ending.」

「Do you hate Asuta that much? Asuta only wishes for the prosperity of Forest's Edge. In order to keep the denizens of Forest's Edge from starving to death, he is doing everything he can. Since the Tsun clan harbors the same ambition, then Asuta, the Fa house, and the Wu clan are just inheriting your will. Why don't you think about it from this perspective?」

「You are just wagging your tail at Genos! No matter how prosperous Forest's Edge becomes, we can't take back our former glory!」

「That's not true! I... no, we are not swooning over Genos, we just want to coexist with them! We are not trampling over any rules or laws, we just want to renew our bonds with our brethrens who honor the same laws!」

I looked into Ai Fa's eyes and interjected.

I couldn't help explaining myself when I saw the sadness on Ai Fa's face.

「You call them your brethrens? Genos oppresses us with unreasonable means and you call them your brethrens!? What a joke! Genos is the enemy! We have to make them submit to Forest's Edge!」

「I don't think so! Ai Fa and the members of the Wu clan don't think so either! The denizens of Forest's Edge follow the rules on their own volition. Even if they are treated unfairly, they won't think they are being oppressed! If the Tsun clan harbored such a grudge, it must have been stirred by the Genos castle.」

Even though the people from Genos castle were listening in on us, I couldn't avoid talking about this.

「The Wu clan, Zaza house, and Sauti clan will inherit your will. They took on the roles of tribal chiefs in the stead of the Tsun clan and will continue liaising with the Genos castle. All the denizens of Forest's Edge will shoulder the frustration of the Tsun clan together. But we won't yield and will do everything within our powers to form a proper bond with the citizens of Genos... Could you entrust the future of Forest's Edge to us?」

「... Are you stupid?」

With intense hatred overflowing within him, Tay Tsun spat out these words:

「Who cares about the future of Forest's Edge!? I'm going to die! Zattsu Tsun is dead! With the Tsun clan in ruins, the world might as well be filled with destruction and despair! Be it Forest's Edge, this town or Rock City, just destroy them all!」

*It's useless... I grit my teeth.*

My words failed to ease Tay Tsun's hate.

「... In that case, then take my life too.」

Ai Fa suddenly said in a weak and frail voice.

While I was still astonished by that, Ai Fa took another step closer.

「Don't come any closer, head of the Fa house. Are you trying to create an opportunity with your trivial words?」

「I'm not trying to do that. If my family gets murdered in front of my eyes, I won't hang on to life shamelessly... If you want to kill Asuta, then kill me too.」

「What are you saying, Ai Fa!」

Ai Fa wasn't suited for such depressing words.

No matter how much hardship she had to endure— she would never choose death— this wasn't something that the Ai Fa I knew would do.

Ai Fa tossed the saber at her waist aside dejectedly.

She then held the knife with her left hand and handed it over hilt first.

「End my life with this knife. If possible, kill me first... I don't want to see Asuta die.」

「Hold it! Don't come near me! I won't let you pull off your scheme! You are not trying to give me the knife, but are handing it to this brat, correct!?!」

「What are you saying? Asuta is only as strong as a woman. Even with your grave wounds, you will get the knife faster than him.」

Ai Fa wanted to come nearer, but Tay shouted again:

「Don't move! I can't move my right arm! The nerves in my right shoulder got severed by you people. I can only take one person with me. If you want to die, then cut your own throat after I strangle this brat!」

「I see...」

Ai Fa mumbled.

「So you can't move your right arm, Tay Tsun.」

The next instant, the fingers strangling my throat lost their strength.

At the same time, Ai Fa charged in and pulled me forcefully away from Tay Tsun.

After that... I heard a scream from afar. It was probably from the Post Station Town residents who had gathered in the streets.

Ai Fa fell to the ground with me in her arms.

After pressing me down, she propped up her upper body, raising the knife she had switched into her other hand without me noticing behind her.

But she could let down her guard now. Tay Tsun leaned against the tree and collapsed with blood spraying out from his throat and left elbow.

「What... just...?」

I muttered almost on reflex and slowly pushed my upper body up.

Ludo Wu's group, Kamyua Yost, and Malfreed didn't move at all. Despite that, Tay Tsun was still lying in a pool of blood.

Was everything just a bad dream? As such a retarded thought flashed across my mind, a small figure suddenly came out from the shade of the tree that Tay Tsun was leaning against.

「Shameless fool who has lost your honor... While you were living comfortably in the Tsun clan, how could you know the pain of watching your own children starve to death?」

It was the head of the Sudora house.

He was gloomy and smaller than anyone present. He flicked away the blood on his knife and sheathed it. He then turned to the castle guard commander dressed in white:

「I killed the felon of Forest's Edge. Is this a breach of Rock City's laws?」

「... We have already issued a notice that he is wanted by the law, dead or alive. You won't be charged for any crimes.」

「I see, that's good.」

The head of the Sudora house muttered to himself. He seemed depressed and didn't look proud or happy at all.

When Ai Fa drew Tay Tsun's attention, he probably sneaked away from the 『Myam-roasted meat』 stall, hid his presence, and carefully went around the woods behind Tay Tsun.

He then hacked Tay Tsun's left elbow, and, after Ai Fa pulled me away, stabbed Tay Tsun's throat with his knife.

「Head of the Fa house, I only got the chance to act because of your quick improvisation. So he really couldn't move his right arm.」

「Thank you for saving my family. I'm very grateful.」

Ai Fa answered formally, then gripped my right hand with her left.

To me, her body warmth and strength was very precious. I stood up slowly as I felt this very fact.

I then walked towards Tay Tsun together with Ai Fa.

So there was so much blood in a person's body... Tay Tsun laid in a shockingly large pool of blood and stared at space with a blank expression.

He didn't show any emotions, and his eyes were murky like a dead fish.



Just what kind of face did he show when he hailed those curses dripping with hatred? I couldn't imagine as I couldn't see him just then.

「Tay Tsun...」

I knelt beside Tay Tsun, with no regards for the blood dirtying my feet.

His murky eyes were slowly losing their light. He looked at me weakly.

「Was it you who saved Ai Fa during the house head conference? 」

Tay Tsun closed his eyes and refused to answer.

The moment before his weakly heaving chest stopped moving, he opened his eyes slowly— just like that moment when he tasted the 『Kiba burger』 . He had a warm smile on his bloodstained face.

「... I have finally finished my last job...」

These were the last words of Tay Tsun, the man born to the branch house of the tribal chief clan, and toyed for 51 years by the powerful and evil tribal chief.



# Epilogue

「... I'm very sorry!」

The next day— Seventeenth of the Blue month, evening.

Dinner was being prepared in the Fa house during this time. And Kamyua Yost was bowing at us deeply.

Ai Fa was sitting cross-legged with one knee propped up and had a peeved face. I checked the taste of the soup and looked at the back of his golden-brown hair.

「Like what you have already figured out, that caravan was actually a trap to bait out the Tsun clan. There were five 《Guardians》, but the other 18 men were a bunch of tough brutes who usually worked as mercenaries. This was planned entirely by the castle guard commander Malfreed.」

「Aside from the one who planned this, everything else was how I imagined. As expected, the higher-ups in Genos were trying to bring the Tsun clan to justice.」

「Erm~, instead of the higher management in Genos, this is actually closer to the decision of Malfreed. Marquis Marstein Genos, his father, gave his implicit consent, while the Lord Pyschkurewuss was kept in the dark.」

Kamyua Yost slowly raised his head while he spoke.

「I see.」

I added another pinch of rock salt into the soup.

「So the top management of Genos is not united. By the way, seeing how the Genos castle had always ignored the Tsun clan's crimes, they sure change their stances quickly.」

「These matters were completely under the purview of Pyschkurewuss. Because of his negligence, Malfreed, who values justice and the law heavily, decided to wield his blade to pass judgment. Marquis Genos is just watching quietly with an awkward smile.」

「So his role is to smile awkwardly. The landlord sure has it easy.」

「He has plenty on his plate after all. Since he had delegated the task to his subordinate, he can't interfere recklessly. That's how a person with a high standing should act.」

Kamyua Yost shrugged nonchalantly, then shirked away when he noticed Ai Fa's icy gaze. No matter how docile he acted, he still looked suspicious.

「I'm in a difficult position too. When Malfreed asked me to help and the planning was halfway done, I became acquainted with you. After speaking with Donda Wu in the Wu clan village, I realized that the Tsun clan was the only clan in Forest's Edge that had fallen into depravity. I also learned that the denizens of Forest's Edge are really a tribe filled with honor... This filled me with unease.」

「You felt uneasy? Why?」

「When you exposed the Tsun clan's crimes, I was worried that the gulf between Genos and Forest's Edge would grow deeper... The citizens of the Post Station Town would fear the denizens of Forest's Edge even more, and the denizens of Forest's Edge would feel further disdain towards Genos. I never imagined that the denizens of Forest's Edge would have such strong pride, which is my biggest mistake.」

It was difficult to predict that.

I wanted to know what Kamyua Yost really thought, so I didn't butt in.

「That's why I proposed to stop the plan! I really did! But Malfreed refused to listen, he thinks that a crime is a crime, and criminals must be brought to justice. No matter how much noise the denizens of Forest's Edge might make, he believes justice will stand by his side... He might look cool and collected, but he is actually a hot-blooded man.」

「I see. I don't think his idea is wrong.」

That was the strange part. I could understand where they were coming from, but I just couldn't accept his way of doing things.

Unfortunately, what Kamyua Yost said didn't unravel the question in my heart.

「Not being wrong doesn't mean it is right. Malfreed's 『right answer』 is one dimensional. He is only after the logical conclusion of the 『present』. He doesn't care about the 『past』 or the 『future』, and only considers things that make sense right now. He doesn't think about the reasons why the crime happened or what kind of future awaits us if he brings down the hammer of justice on the criminal. He is only seeking the justice of the present... This might be an easy way of doing this, but that is dangerous.」

Kamyua Yost sat down with his cloak on, and his eyes looked distant.

「To be frank, Psychkurewuss from Genos castle ignored the crimes of the Tsun clan. But Malfreed didn't pursue Psychkurewuss' responsibility. Despite not being involved, he still interfered and played an ally of justice. Isn't his style really troublesome? However, Malfreed's objective is to punish the crime, he doesn't want to announce how right he is. He is happy as long as the criminal is prosecuted.」

His obsessive compulsion with cleanliness resembled the denizens of Forest's Edge a little.

After hearing Kamyua Yost's explanation, there were a few points I didn't agree with.

「Please wait, why did the people from Genos castle refuse to let us stop our business temporarily? They wanted to use us as a bait to lure out Zattsu Tsun, right? In that case, it means they wanted to apprehend the criminal so much that they put the denizens of Forest's Edge and the people of Post Station Town at risk.」

「The one who refused to let you stop is Pyschkurewuss, Malfreed has no authority regarding the denizens of Forest's Edge. On the contrary, he thinks letting you run your stall is dangerous. The responsibilities of the castle guards don't include patrolling the Post Station Town, but in order to protect your safety, he still did so.」

Kamyua Yost drooped his brows guiltily again.

「You should have realized by now, correct? I was the one who ignited the sense of justice in Malfreed's heart. Half a year ago, after I got acquainted with him through Marquis Genos, I shared all the information I had with him. I also discussed with him how to improve the twisted relationship between Tsun clan and Pyschkurewuss— and also the relationship between Forest's Edge and Genos. In the end, we decided to appoint Zashuma— who isn't a merchant, but a 《Guardian》 — as a strategist and executed this plan. I'm the one who coerced him in the beginning, but I lack the capability to lead such a big project involving so many people. So I took a step back and became a supporter and watched things develop quietly.」

That suited his personality. I thought this man who liked pretending to be retarded befitted the role of 「observer」 the most.

「However, I felt worried after talking to you, Ai Fa, and Donda Wu. On top of that, I couldn't tell you the truth, so my heart was filled with guilt. So when I suggested you to open a stall in the Post Station Town, I was just trying to ease my conscience.」

「Ehh?」

「If you build up the relationship between the Post Station Town and Forest's Edge, there might be a bit of hope. The fear and detest felt by the people of the Post Station Town towards the denizens of Forest's Edge will ease up a little. That's what I was hoping for when I initially proposed for you to start a business in the Post Station Town. And of course, I have always believed that the denizens of Forest's Edge deserve a more prosperous life.」

If Kamyua Yost didn't propose that I set up a stall... I wouldn't have gotten to know Milano Mast, Yumi, Naudiz, Pops Balan's entourage, and Shumimaru's band.

The Tsun clan wouldn't have requested for me to tend to their hearth, which led to me exposing their crimes of stealing from the forest.

And now, I couldn't imagine what would have happened instead.

「… Kamyua, you have given us much convenience as a person from the Rock City. I can understand that. But…」

「The denizens of Forest's Edge won't forgive a con man like me.」

Kamyua Yost scratched his thin jaw that was covered with a stubble.

「Never mind, I'm fine with that. Even if all the Forest's Edge thinks of me as a snake, my admiration and respect for you all won't change. But it will be troubling if you don't trust Genos. The denizens of Forest's Edge are righteous and brave, I wouldn't want you to ditch the Morga forest and move to some other forest.」

「… Did you eavesdrop on us again?」

「I did not! So you really did discuss that? That's troubling... The tribal chiefs met with that Pyschkurewuss a few times already, correct? Do you think that the people from Rock City seem more and more suspicious?」

I still didn't know what kind of person Pyschkurewuss was.

Was he really involved with the incident this time?

「Can I ask you a question? You mentioned that you won't pursue Pyschkurewuss' part in the matter and exposing the Tsun clan's crimes would just trouble the people around us. If that is so, why did you ignore Pyschkurewuss and formulate such a crude plan to force the Tsun clan to the precipice?」

「Hmm? If I want to expose Pyschkurewuss' crimes, I will need to flush out his accomplice, the Tsun clan, right?」

「… What?」

I thought I heard something incredible.

Kamyua Yost scratched his head and said:

「Ah, I never mentioned this, right? I don't have evidence, but two or three of the people hurt by the denizens of Forest's Edge were Pyschkurewuss' political enemy. It might look like the works of bandits on the surface, but it happened over a decade ago, so I can't find any solid evidence.」

「If that is so…」

「And the girls from farming villages abducted by the denizens of Forest's Edge got sold to slave merchants. Putting that with the caravan incident ten years ago, the denizens of Forest's Edge couldn't have traded the loot for copper plates by themselves. It would be more natural to think that someone in Rock City is helping them.」

「If all of this is known, why wasn't this man sentenced for his crimes?」

「Because we lack evidence. That's why we wanted to capture the vicious criminal Zattsu Tsun alive... Regrettably, he didn't answer our questions and just kept hailing insults our way.」

「...」

「Although he didn't answer the questions, he confessed that he attacked the caravan of the citizens of the Post Station Town ten years ago before. Malfreed thinks this is the only evidence we can rely on to push Pyschkurewuss to the brink.」

「... So you want to expose Pyschkurewuss' crimes next?」

「Of course. If we uncover any wrongdoing, Malfreed will swing down his sword of justice... Since the opponent is an evil aristocrat of Rock City, I can assist him without any hesitation.」

Kamyua Yost showed his Cheshire cat-like smile again.

This man... Who exactly was he?

I turned to Ai Fa and found her observing Kamyua Yost suspiciously.

「Ai Fa, what are your thoughts about him?」

「Hmm?」

「He lied to us for tens of days and caused Dali Sauti to meet with danger, don't you want to chastise a despicable liar like him?」

「No, erm, can you wait until I'm gone before you...」

「I don't feel that way.」

Ai Fa cut off Kamyua Yost firmly.

「I knew this man couldn't be trusted from the start. As for the men of the Sauti clan... They fought against kiba as part of their obligation as hunters. The vicious criminals who agitated the kiba are the ones to blame.」

「Yes, but Kamyua's posse refused the Sauti clan's suggestion to increase the number of escorts because they wanted to apprehend the vicious criminals by themselves, right? With that in mind, he really is despicable.」

「No, erm, well...」

「However, he couldn't have relayed the entire matter to the other party. They didn't know what kind of house the Sauti was, and it would be terrible if the Sauti was actually in cahoots with the Tsun clan. Besides, the vicious criminal might give up on the attack if they saw a dozen hunters working as escorts... He was doing this all for the sake of apprehending the vicious criminals.」

I agreed with Ai Fa and returned my gaze back to Kamyua Yost.

「Similar to how the relationships between the people in Rock City aren't airtight, the denizens of Forest's Edge also harbor their own thinking. No matter what, if we want to maintain our relationships, we need to be accommodating, understanding, and communicating properly with each other.」

「... Communicating? Who should communicate with whom?」

「My people with your people, Forest's Edge and Genos... Kamyua Yost, you mentioned before that you don't mind being detested by the denizens of Forest's Edge, and Malfreed has no intentions of justifying his actions. The denizens of Forest's Edge are also apathetic towards the Post Station Town and Rock City citizens. Under such circumstances, how can we form proper bonds?」

「Hmm?」

Kamyua Yost tilted his head quizzingly.

I stared at his face and said:

「First of all, you have to give the tribal chiefs of Forest's Edge an honest account of everything that happened. After establishing a minimum level of trust between the two sides, bring Malfreed along to their meeting with Pyschkurewuss that is scheduled to happen a few days later.」

「Malfreed? Bring him to the meeting? Asuta, that will be huge! Malfreed might be grinding his blade right now as he prepares to expose Pyschkurewuss' past crimes!」

「That might be so, but Forest's Edge already knows that your caravan was a farce and also about that incident 10 years ago. They will definitely bring it up during the meeting... If neither you nor Malfreed is present, this matter won't make any progress.」

「What are you talking about! Asuta, do you think I have to participate in the meeting too?」

「Am I wrong...? My hometown has a saying that 『Silence is golden』, but in the face of such circumstances, silence won't resolve any problems. Everyone needs to come to an understanding by talking it out.」

Just wanting the other side to believe you one-sidedly might result in the failure to convey your thoughts properly at times.

No matter how clumsy, sometimes, you have to say how you really feel to convey your intentions to the other party.

After watching Tay Tsun's actions yesterday, I understood this point.

Tay Tsun was like the spokesman for Zattsu Tsun and advocated for the righteousness of the Tsun clan's actions. But the denizens of Forest's Edge responded in anger. Not just Ai Fa, Ludo Wu, Rau



Lei, Shin Wu, and me— all the denizens born and bred in Forest's Edge wanted to speak their piece to Tay Tsun.

And this resulted in the Post Station Town's people hearing what the denizens of Forest's Edge really felt. This was the first time they learned what the denizens of Forest's Edge thought and their feelings towards life.

When Tay Tsun's corpse was taken away and the soldiers released us from custody, Uncle Dora embraced us. He was crying a river, and so was Tara. In the beginning, I didn't know why he was so sad. When he calmed down, Uncle Dora said to us:

*I didn't know that the denizens of Forest's Edge were living such a life...*

*We can't thank you enough...*

*Before I met you, I always looked at the denizens of Forest's Edge with disdain, I feel so ashamed...*

That was the gist of it.

The denizens of Forest's Edge would rather starve to death than pick the fruits of the forest. This truth devastated Uncle Dora. In order to protect the western farms, Genos forced the denizens of Forest's Edge to live such a life. For people like him who owns a farm in the west, this fact must have pained him.

After that, we obviously didn't continue with our business. After preparing the food in the 《Big Tree of the South Inn》, we returned to the Forest's Edge settlement. The next day, or rather today, we entered the Post Station Town cautiously and found that the atmosphere had returned back to normal. And of course, not all westerners smiled at us, and we saw many people showing fear and doubt. But I could feel that something was different.

Unlike the what happened before that incident, this was a difficult-to-describe change— they seemed to be observing the denizens of Forest's Edge closely and trying to figure out an answer... It wasn't normal discrimination, fear or xenophobia, they were looking at us with a different type of gaze.

*Who exactly are they?* They were silent, but I could feel them asking this question.

How much resolve did the denizens of Forest's Edge had to make when they hunted? The citizens of the Post Station Town finally got their answer.

What crimes did their brethrens commit that made the citizens of Post Station Town so fearful? The denizens of Forest's Edge also received their reply.

I thought the curtains had just been drawn. Could the denizens of Forest's Edge and the people in the Post Station Town really understand each other? Their personalities might be very different,

but could we still be good neighbors and interact with each other? We were finally on the starting line for figuring this out.

In that case, the people from the Genos castle also had to stand at the starting point.

We could give up anytime, but I thought we should work hard towards the goal of understanding each other. And if we found out in the end that we were like oil and water, we could decide to part ways. But before that, no matter how arduous the path might be, we still had to slough on bravely... This was in order to avoid Tay Tsun's death, who played the part of the villain until his last breath, to be in vain.

「... Asuta.」

「Hmm?」

I turned around and saw Ai Fa staring at me with serious eyes.

「When will dinner be ready? I'm hungry.」

「Ah, sorry, I just need to grill the hamburg steak.」

Ai Fa subtly raised her right hand and covered her mouth. She probably wanted to hide her smile after perceiving the term 'hamburg steak'.

「Alright then, I should be going soon. Asuta, I will treat your advice as my homework. Sorry for intruding on your work.」

Kamyua Yost stood up gently.

I was preparing to grill the hamburg steaks and turned my head back in surprise upon hearing him say that.

「Ehh? Are you not staying for dinner? I prepared three portions.」

「What? Do you want to dine with me in such a situation?」

「I thought your visit at this hour implied this as your true goal.」

「Even the thick-skinned me isn't that shameless...」

「Are you going back then?」

「No, I will be much obliged!」

He announced frantically and suddenly narrowed his eyes.

「Asuta, you have grown strong. You are completely different from when I first met you.」

「That's true. After being through so much, it would be terrible if I have not grown at all.」

I looked at Kamyua Yost's strange eyes.

「Kamyua Yost, from the very beginning, you have been an important person to us.」

「Huh? Why are you saying that all of a sudden? I'm just a nomad without fixed roots.」

「Even so, things wouldn't have become so complicated if we had built a stronger bond. I have been keeping an adequate distance from you too. If I trusted you from the bottom of my heart... and you also did the same, there might have been fewer casualties.」

「But I trust you a lot.」

「If so, why didn't you tell me the true purpose of the caravan? Why didn't you tell me about the misfortune of the loved ones of Milano Mast and Leito? If you told me that, the men from the Sauti clan wouldn't have gotten injured for nothing.」

When he heard my words, Kamyua Yost was at a loss for words, which was a rare sight.

「However, you had no other choice back then. After all, I didn't tell you the whole information on the Tsun clan's situation either. So we are even there, but...」

However, if we could get closer to each other and brainstorm about it, we might have been able to find a way to only bring Zattsu Tsun to task without implicating anyone else. This filled me with regret.

「... I heard that they will permit Tay Tsun's body to be buried in Forest's Edge.」

Kamyua Yost suddenly brought up this matter.

He narrowed his drooping eyes which were filled with a clear light.

「Yes, his former family members buried him in Forest's Edge personally... What about it?」

「No, nothing. Instead of atoning him by interring him as a criminal in Rock City, this might be a better way of doing it.」

「Kamyua, if we are to build a stronger relationship of trust, we will have to share what we really think with each other. We can't take the stand that silence is golden... Let me be frank with you, I don't like your eyes that seem to be able to see through anything.」

Kamyua Yost looked at me with his usual gaze, then shrugged his shoulders under his cloak.

「That's really mean, I have never learned mind reading before.」

「Anyway, the people of Forest's Edge and Genos castle need to open their hearts to each other. Can you bring Malfreed to the meeting?」

「That will be difficult, but for the sake of the friendship between Forest's Edge and Genos, I will do everything I can.」

After Kamyua Yost said that, he showed a satisfied smile.

At this moment, Ai Fa kept tugging at my sleeve, her eyes were saying: 「Is the hamburg steak done yet?」

There was still a mountain of problems between Forest's Edge and Genos. With that in mind, I cooked dinner for my beloved house head and the friend of ours who liked pretending to be retarded.

## Mid Meal Snack: The Hearth Caretaker of the Wu clan

「Leina-nee, why do you look so down?」

The Wu clan sisters were preparing dinner. Lala Wu who was grilling the poitan asked curiously.

Leina Wu who was cooking the kiba soup answered weakly:

「It's nothing...」

「It's not nothing. Did I make you mad?」

「Not at all, why must I be angry at you?」

「Well~, because you have been stealing glances at me. I thought you are unhappy about something.」

「How can that be...? I just think your skill in tending to the hearth has improved.」

Leina Wu sighed when she answered. Lala Wu raised her eyebrows a little unhappily and leaned closer.

「See, you really are feeling down. Just tell me what's on your mind.」

「I already told you that isn't it... I'm just a little envious of you and Vena-nee...」

「Hmm? Envious? What do you mean?」

「You get to help Asuta every day, so your skills are getting better, right? Of course, I will feel envious.」

Lala Wu stopped looking peeved, and said confusedly:

「Hmm~? But Vena-nee and I are just helping to tend to the stall, and don't cut the meat or vegetables. That wouldn't improve our skills at all.」

「No, you are far better than before. You did very well during the house head conference too.」

「Really? I will be glad if that is true.」

Lala Wu showed her teeth with a smile and then reverted back to her usual expression.

「Speaking of which, Asuta is letting Shela Wu grill the meat now. Vena-nee and I will never win against her.」

「That's true. I think she is incredible too.」

Leina Wu sighed after saying that.

「Her culinary skills must be amazing now, and I can never catch up to her now... Sigh, I want to help with Asuta's work too...」

「... Are you saying that because you want to improve your culinary skills?」

「Huh? What do you mean?」

「I'm just wondering if you want to do this because you want to spend time together with Asuta.」

「T-That's not it!」

Leina Wu's face turned beet red.

「It must be nice to work together with Asuta... But compared to that, I want to improve my hearth tending skills more! It's true, I'm not lying.」

「Don't be so flustered. It's more natural for you to think that anyway.」

Lala Wu piled the grilled poitan onto a plate and shrugged.

「Leina-nee, you are still the best hearth caretaker in our family, far better than me and Vena-nee. You don't need to improve anymore, right? Didn't Ludo always say that your cooking tastes the best?」

「That's because he doesn't compare me with Asuta...」

「Why are you comparing yourself with Asuta? Asuta is special, you can't win against him.」

Leina Wu was stumped.

Lala Wu's words surprised her too much.

「... But, you want to get better at tending to the hearth too, right? Wouldn't it be amazing if your cooking is as good as Asuta's?」

「Huh? Of course, I want to get better at grilling meat. But I will never win against Asuta... Leina-nee, are you troubled over this?」

Lala Wu asked bewilderedly and scratched her red hair.

「Leina-nee, you are thinking of something amazing. If I have to say... I'm envious of Shela Wu and you who already can serve up delicious meals.」

「Ehh?」

「No matter what, don't be too depressed, it will worry the people around you. I can guarantee that your culinary skills are great.」

Lala Wu said a little angrily, then shoved a krilee stick through the empty pot.

「It's not dark yet, so I will wash the pot. Don't daze around and spoil the food. Everyone is looking forward to your cooking.」

After Lala Wu left the stove room, Leina Wu sighed again.

*So that's how Lala feels. Even though I'm still lacking...*

Leina Wu wanted to serve even more delicious meals for everyone. If her cooking could rival that of Asuta, how blissful would that be... She had been thinking about this for dozens of days.

However, she still couldn't go and help in the Post Station Town. All this time, Shela Wu had been improving steadily and could even tend to the stall when Asuta had to leave. Shela Wu's hearth caretaking abilities must be better than hers. When Leina Wu thought about that, her heart became filled with deep regrets.

Shela Wu was an important kin. She was also the daughter of Donda Wu's younger brother, a close relative of Leina Wu. As her culinary skills improved, she became more cheerful and bright. Leina Wu was happy for her, but that also filled with regret and sadness.

If Asuta could tutor her, she would definitely get a lot better. Her cooking might be on par with Asuta's then... Was thinking like this arrogant and ungrateful?

But Leina Wu couldn't stop this feeling.

Lala Wu was right. She did want to meet Asuta. If possible, she still wished for Asuta to become a member of the Wu clan. She hoped Asuta could become her family and to walk down the same path together. Her mind was clogged with such thoughts, which frequently resulted in insomnia.

Compared to how much she thought about Asuta... no, because of how much Leina Wu thought about Asuta, she hoped to improve further and get on the same level as Asuta. She wanted to stand on the same height as Asuta and look at the same scenery. Leina Wu probably didn't want to be with Asuta, she wants to be Asuta.

*I can't see anything right now. I also want to do the things that Asuta can do so easily. The one I'm the most envious of is probably Asuta, not Shela Wu.*

Just what kind of emotion was this?

She felt a sadness that seemed to be tightening her chest. The next instant, her heart was filled with jealousy, as if a fire was burning in her abdomen. She never realized that she was such a despicable person. Leina Wu felt like crying.

However, that was just how she was.

Everyone thought that Lala Wu's personality was more violent and Vena Wu was more steadfast. However, the strong personality hidden inside Leina Wu was on par with them.

*Does Asuta harbor such thoughts too...?*

Leina Wu thought as she added firewood into the stove.

At this moment, Rimee Wu just happened to return to the stove room.

「This dish is done! Hmm? Where is Lala?」

Rimee Wu and Grandma Ditto Min Wu were roasting meat in the stove outside.

Leina Wu stirred the soup in the pot and turned her head meekly.

「Lala went to wash the pot. I'm done too, can you help me get the plates?」

「Yes, got it!」

Rimee Wu moved swiftly and placed plates onto a board according to the number of people. They just needed to bring the pot into the house and serve it to everyone.

Rimee Wu who had done her work walked towards Leina Wu.

「Hmm~, smells nice! Did you add that ingredient called Tau Sauce?」

「Yes, Asuta said it's well suited for soup.」

「It looks yummy! Can I try some?」

「Huh? We are having dinner soon, though?」

「But Papa and the rest are still out hunting. I'm starving and can't wait any longer.」

Rimee Wu tugged at Leina Wu's waistband while saying that.

Leina Wu smiled wryly and said: 「Help me get a small plate.」, and Rimee Wu spun around gleefully.

Today's kiba contained Aria, Chachi, and tino. She also seasoned the soup with salt and Tau sauce. And of course, they added generous servings of kiba meat too.

Tau Sauce was an incredible ingredient. She heard that this was a type of 「seasoning」. Tau sauce couldn't be eaten alone, but by adding it to other ingredients, the food would become delicious, like after using some sort of magic potion.

One bottle of Tau sauce cost ten red copper plates. Ten red copper plates could buy ten fruit wines, or 40 poitan, or 50 Aria. After pleading with her parents for a long time, she finally got permission to buy this bottle of seasoning.

If Leina Wu failed in any one of her cooking, they probably wouldn't allow her to buy Tau Sauce anymore. And so, Leina Wu carefully tasted the soup and used the Tau Sauce cherishingly. She had used it for a few days now, and her parents had yet to scold her.



「Here's the plate! Can you add a little bit of meat and vegetables? 」

Leina Wu nodded and poured the 『Kiba meat soup』 into the tiny plate.

Rimee Wu showed a big smile and then sipped the soup.

「So yummy! Leina-nee, your soup is the best! 」

「It's thanks to the Tau sauce. Anyone can cook delicious soup with this ingredient. 」

「That's not true. The meat soup you served in the past is also tastier than everyone else's. 」

Rimee Wu bit the small piece of kiba cherishingly and continued:

「Besides, Asuta also said this before, right? The taste and fragrance of the Tau sauce are strong and won't change even if you cooked it for a long time, so it isn't an ingredient that is easy to use. I don't think anyone can cook such a tasty soup even if they used Tau sauce! 」

「... Even so, I still can't beat Asuta. 」

Leina Wu said depressedly again.

Rimee Wu tilted her head after hearing that.

「Is that so? You and Shela Wu will be as good as Asuta one day, right? Although it is impossible for Vena-nee and Lala. 」

Leina Wu was shocked and stared at the petite face of the Wu clan's youngest daughter.

「B-But it's Asuta, you know? Leaving me aside, even Shela Wu can't defeat him. 」

「It's not true. You and Shela Wu are as passionate towards cooking as Asuta, correct? 」

Rimee Wu smiled gently.

「Ludo once said that the prouder the hunter, the more capable he is. If one was to find joy in the life of a hunter and work with honor, they could become stronger... Shela Wu and you will definitely become hearth caretakers that can stand up to Asuta! 」

Leina Wu became lost for words.

Rimee Wu leaned towards Leina Wu again.

「Rimee will work hard, so you have to work hard too, alright? Let's become great hearth caretakers together! 」

Leina Wu couldn't find the words to answer and placed her hand on Rimee Wu's head.

Rimee Wu's smile was as bright as the morning sun. The troubling feelings in Leina Wu's chest transformed into other emotions as Leina looked at her sister.